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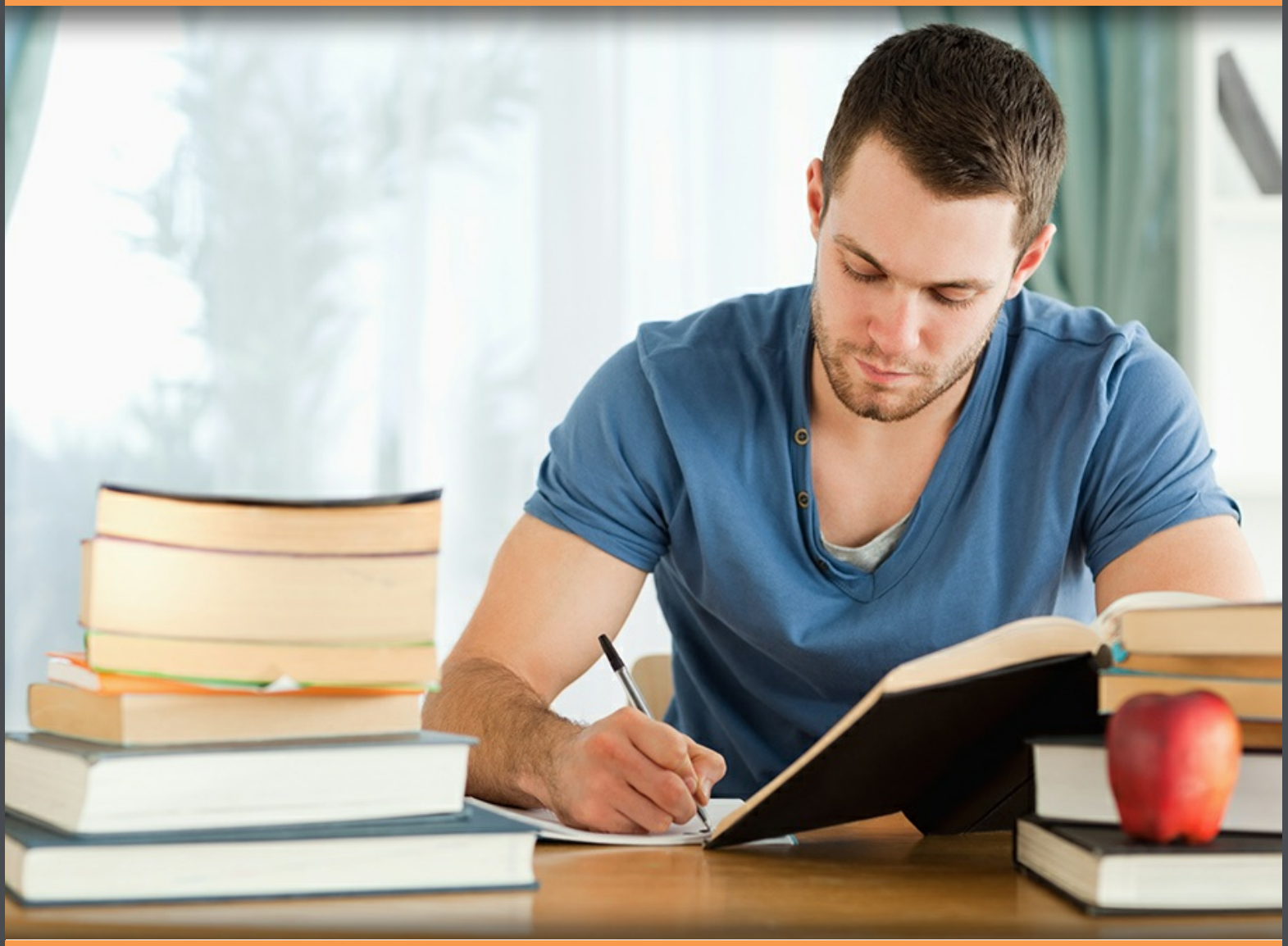
How to Write an Essay

Alan Barker



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Alan Barker

How to Write an Essay

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How to Write an Essay
1st edition
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ISBN 978-87-403-0571-5

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Contents

	About the author	**7**
	Introduction	**8**
1	**Why write essays?**	**10**
1.1	Your reasons for writing	11
1.2	What your tutor is looking for	14
1.3	The *real* reason for writing a good essay	16
2	**What is an essay?**	**18**
2.1	The three defining features of an essay	19
2.2	Joining the academic conversation	26

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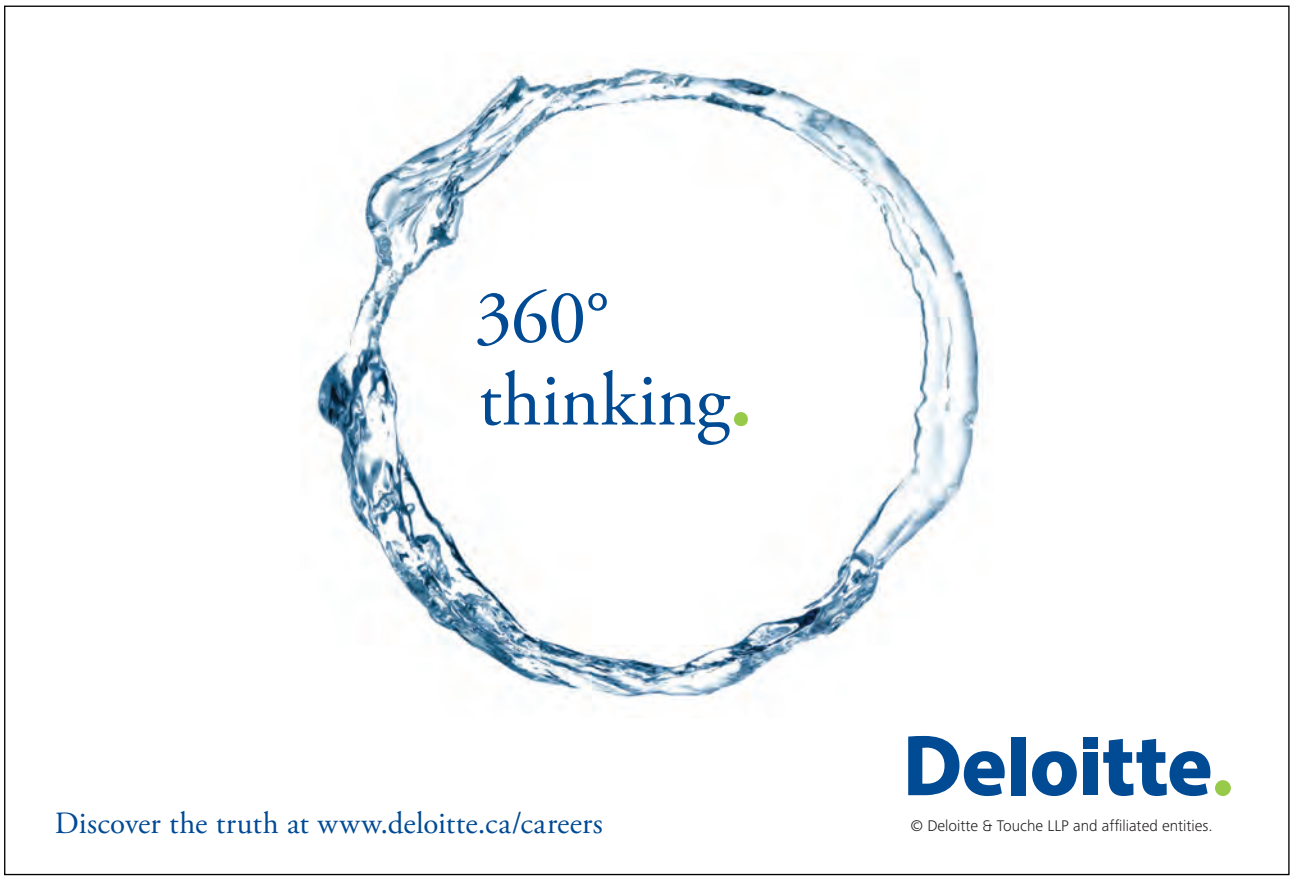
3	**Get going!**	**28**
3.1	Procrastination: the art of putting it off	29
3.2	Getting to grips with writing	31
3.3	Getting to grips with study	35
3.4	Essay writing in three stages: plan; draft; edit	37
4	**Answering the question**	**40**
4.1	Understanding the question	41
4.2	Creating a thesis statement	52
5	**Constructing an outline**	**71**
5.1	Creating a frame of reference	73
5.2	Supporting your thesis statement: building a pyramid	74
6	**Drafting**	**81**
6.1	From head to page: ten tips for drafting more easily	83
6.2	Illustrating, citing and quoting (and avoiding plagiarism)	85
6.3	Grabbing the reader's attention: the introduction	92
6.4	Ending well: writing the conclusion	98



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7	**Editing**	**102**
7.1	Why edit?	104
7.2	Bringing paragraphs under control	105
7.3	Constructing straightforward sentences	109
7.4	Using words well	112
7.5	Developing your style	118
8	**Dealing with feedback**	**124**
8.1	Presenting your essay well	127
8.2	Making the most of feedback	128
9	**Appendix: where to go from here**	**131**
	Book list	131
	Websites and links	132

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About the author

Alan Barker is Managing Director of Kairos Training Limited, a specialist consultancy that delivers training and coaching in communication skills, clear thinking and creativity.

Kairos operates globally. As well as working with organizations in the UK, Alan regularly travels to other parts of Europe, as well as working in the Middle East, Asia, the United States and Africa.

Alan is the published author of sixteen books.

Alan's blog is Distributed Intelligence.

Find out more about him and about Kairos by going to the company's website:

www.kairostraining.co.uk

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Introduction

Esther has just graduated from a highly respected university with a degree in economics. She's rightly proud of her achievement; but she admits that the first year was tough.

The most traumatic element?

Writing essays.

In her first weeks, she told me, she would work deep into the night, trying to put an essay together. "It was the words that were so difficult at the start," she says. "All those academic terms. And then, putting my own thoughts into academic language was difficult."

As the weeks went on, she realized that there was another question bothering her. "Nobody told me that I was entitled to my own views," she says. "The idea that I could actually disagree with the academics I was reading seemed crazy. After all, they'd done all that research, and – who was I?"

Esther's story is not unusual. You may have come to college or university with little training in writing essays. Even if you did well in secondary or high school, you may be unprepared for the challenges of essay writing at college: in particular, the need to research systematically, and the need to construct arguments in your essays.

And so few students get any help. Some tutors offer one-to-one help, and some colleges offer study skills sessions (although there's evidence that students often resist the offer, perhaps because they feel that the sessions are remedial and demeaning). Again and again, I meet students who have never been told that there's a simple system for producing an academic essay. Neither have they been told that the essence of essay writing is constructing an argument, rather than simply recycling what they've read.

With nobody offering this kind of straightforward advice, it's no wonder that students can feel overwhelmed – or that so many resort to cheating.

This book will help you take charge. It will show you how to write essays that you can be proud of. It might (though I make no promises) even help you get higher grades for your essays.

Before we start, I need to make a few points about this book.

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First, I believe that my approach is broadly applicable to colleges and universities around the world. The book is based principally on university practice in the United Kingdom, where I live and where I myself was educated. But I've used lots of information and advice from students and teachers in other European countries, as well as from Australia and North America. I believe that the approach outlined here will also help you meet the assessment criteria of the International Baccalaureate.

Secondly, you'll need to adapt my approach for different kinds of essay, and for different disciplines. My own background is in the humanities, where discursive essay writing is the norm. But the principles of arguing an academic case apply just as much to philosophy, marketing, law, engineering, natural sciences and management, as they do in English, history or modern languages. If you're required to produce experimental papers, or technical papers based strongly on statistical evidence, you might need to apply my guidelines with care. If you're writing an admission essay for an American college, you'll need to adapt my approach to make it more obviously individual (although, even in these essays, admissions boards will probably praise you for being able to argue a case rationally and in some depth).

As I repeat frequently throughout this book: if in doubt, ask your tutor what is required of you.

Thirdly, it's likely that you're already using some of the skills discussed here. Very few students start producing essays with no writing experience whatsoever. Don't feel that you must work through this book from start to finish. Look at the chapter summaries; if you wish, focus on some skills before looking at others. Those summaries are in the form of Cornell notes, themselves an extremely useful essay-writing tool, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 4.

Finally, the material in this book might look a little complicated. Be assured that my aim throughout is to make life easier for you: to help you simplify and clarify what you must do to produce an essay that your tutor will appreciate, and that will do you credit.

You'll find out more about essay writing on my blog: Distributed Intelligence.

A number of people have helped me to complete this book. Particular thanks go to Celia Beadle and Professor Richard Toye, who have made valuable suggestions. Thanks also to my wife Gillian, and to my daughter Imogen (who has contributed one especially well written example).

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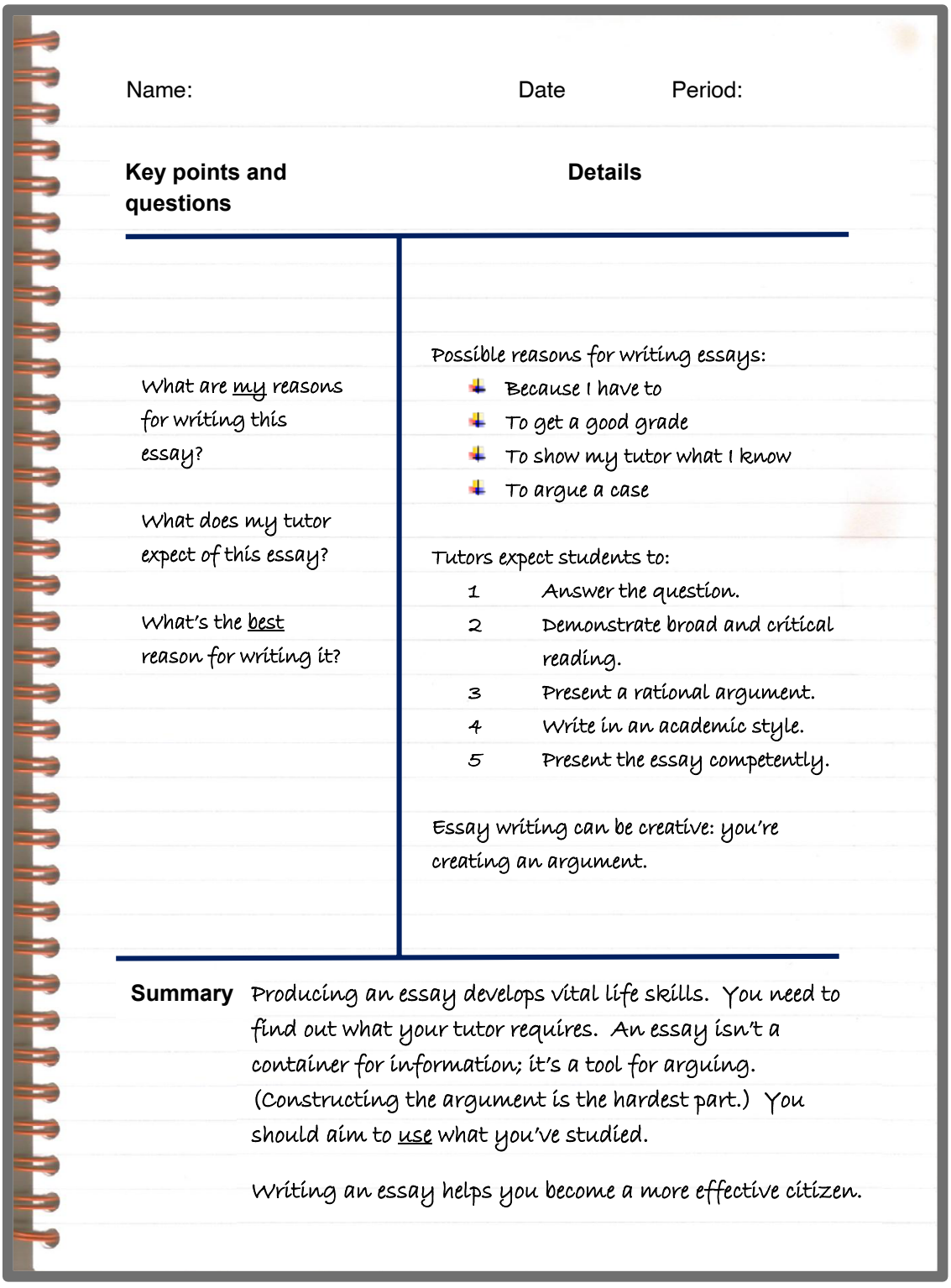
1 Why write essays?



Name: Date Period:

Key points and questions	Details
What are my reasons for writing this essay? What does my tutor expect of this essay? What's the best reason for writing it?	Possible reasons for writing essays: - Because I have to - To get a good grade - To show my tutor what I know - To argue a case Tutors expect students to: 1 Answer the question. 2 Demonstrate broad and critical reading. 3 Present a rational argument. 4 Write in an academic style. 5 Present the essay competently. Essay writing can be creative: you're creating an argument.

Summary Producing an essay develops vital life skills. You need to find out what your tutor requires. An essay isn't a container for information; it's a tool for arguing. (Constructing the argument is the hardest part.) You should aim to use what you've studied.

Writing an essay helps you become a more effective citizen.

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Why write essays?

Good question.

Essays, with examinations, are probably your most important contribution to your work at college or university. (Exams, of course, often include essay-writing under time constraints.) And, for many students, they present more challenges than any other part of study. You may have written essays at school; but the demands of a college essay will be greater.

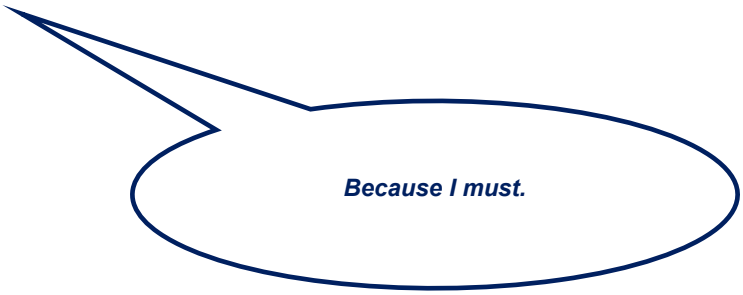
Essays have different functions in different subjects. Indeed, in some subjects, you may find yourself writing papers with different names: assignments, reports, or – as you approach the end of your course – dissertations. All of these papers have subtly different conventions. The skills I'll be discussing in this book apply to all of them, more or less; if in doubt, check with your tutor or department head precisely what's required of the paper you're working on.

You will almost certainly be asked, at some point in your course, to produce a structured, formal piece of writing. So why are essays so important?

1.1 Your reasons for writing

Let's start with *your* reasons. Why are *you* working on an essay? Here are four answers, from four students I spoke to. Which one would be yours?

Here's what Francis told me:



For many students, writing – whether essays or anything else – is a chore. They might rather spend writing time on 'real work': doing research, conducting experiments, creating performances or improving their management skills. (Francis is studying forestry.)

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I have a lot of sympathy with these students. We don't all enjoy writing. And it's not always obvious why writing essays matters so much, especially in science subjects, or on more vocational courses. What have essays to do with real study?

The answer: producing a good essay develops vital life skills. We'll talk more about these skills in a moment.

Next, Sacha's answer:

Sacha wants to pass. You may want to do a lot more than just pass. Your grades tell you – and the world – how well you've done. You want to do whatever's necessary to gain a good mark.

It's a laudable aim. We all want to do well, and we all enjoy being rewarded for our efforts.

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It's not always clear how tutors and examiners decide on the grades they give essays. What are they looking for? How do they decide?

Perhaps you've had some unhappy experiences in the past, receiving disappointing marks for essays you worked hard on. Maybe you received little feedback on those essays; maybe the feedback you did get was hard to understand.

My top tip if this is your answer: find out what's required. You'll find plenty of information in this book about what tutors and examiners generally look for when they're marking essays.

Ask your tutor about their criteria of excellence. Check also with your department or faculty head; ask to see the guidelines for marking. Your college may have a school of composition or writing lab that can give you more help.

Third in line is Ahmed:

You've studied deep into the night. (Ahmed is a very hard-working philosophy student.) You've done all the reading, and then some. What's the point of writing an essay if you don't display all that hard work?

This is a tough one. Of course, your tutor will expect you to refer to the material that you've studied. But the reason for writing an essay is not simply to prove you've done your homework.

It's to prove that you can *think*.

Here's a serious top tip: an essay isn't a container for information. You shouldn't aim to cram in everything you've studied; you should aim to *use* what you've learned.

This is such an important idea that we'll be returning to it often throughout this book. For the moment, bear this point in mind.

It's not what you know that matters; it's how you think.

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Now for Jo's answer:

Ah. Jo has grasped an essential point. We write essays, more or less always, to take a position and argue for it. This essay gives you the opportunity to show that you can argue a case. (Is it a coincidence, perhaps, that Jo is studying law?)

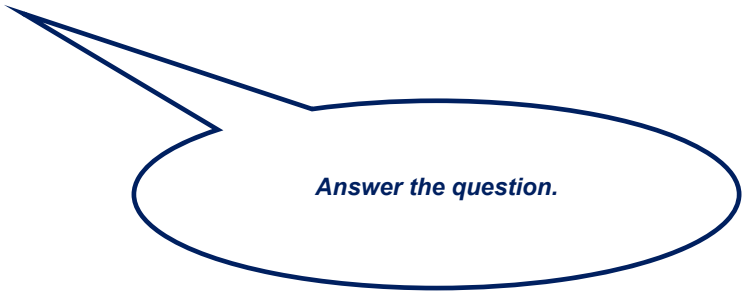
We use arguments all the time. We argue for or against decisions in our families. We make business proposals at work; we seek to persuade people to support the causes that we volunteer for; we may find ourselves engaged in community action or political work. In a multitude of situations, we need to be able to argue a case, to counter the spurious and false arguments of others, and to persuade others to make sound decisions. Writing essays develops that essential skill.

In short: working on an essay helps you prepare to become a more effective citizen.

My top tip here: constructing arguments well is demanding work. Take time to learn some of the techniques we'll explore in this book, and take time to practise them.

1.2 What your tutor is looking for

Over and over again, when they're asked what they want students to do, tutors and examiners say the same thing.



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Why do they say this?

Presumably, because so many students fail to answer essay questions.

And why do they fail?

Perhaps because they find answering the question difficult. Perhaps because they aren't sure *how* to construct an answer. Perhaps because too few students are taught the skills necessary to answer essay questions: the skills of argumentation and explanation.

Your most important task in writing an essay is to answer the question.

Beyond that? Well, we can reasonably expect that your tutor will want your essay to demonstrate that you can do five things.

1. Answer the question.
2. Demonstrate broad and critical reading.
3. Present a rational argument.
4. Write in an academic style.
5. Present the essay competently.

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If you can meet those demands, you'll have a reasonable chance of getting a good grade for your essay.

So what do you need to do to meet those expectations? Here are the answers, and links to the sections in this book that cover those activities.

What your tutor wants you to do	What you need to do	To find out how, go to:
Answer the question	• **Understand the question** • **Identify how you need to answer it** • **Put the question in context** • **Write a predictive thesis statement**	**4.1 Understanding the question** **4.2 Creating a thesis statement**
Demonstrate broad and critical reading	• **Read enough to encompass the question and its context** • **Analyse and evaluate what you read** • **Use what you read in your text**	**4.2.2 Gathering information** **4.2.3 Refining your thesis statement**
Present a rational argument	• **Write a definitive thesis statement** • **Construct an argument to support your thesis** • **Use logic and evidence to support your argument**	**5 Constructing an outline**
Write in an academic style	• **Adjust your style to the needs of academic writing**	**7.5.1 Academic style: the core conventions**
Present the essay competently	• **Edit your paragraphs, sentences and words** • **Format the essay well**	**7.2 Bringing paragraphs under control** **7.3 Constructing straightforward sentences** **7.4 Using words well** **7.5 Developing your style** **8.1 Presenting your essay well**

Your tutor or college should be able to provide you with a list of the criteria by which they grade essays and exam answers. You can find a link to the assessment criteria used by the International Baccalaureate in the appendix.

1.3 The *real* reason for writing a good essay

Writing an essay is an important part of your learning.

- Essay-writing deepens your understanding of the subject you're studying.
- Essay-writing is a major element in assessing your progress.

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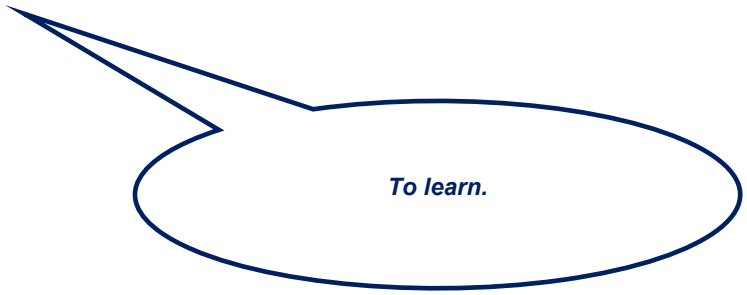
And, most importantly:

- Essay-writing helps you think better.

So: if you were to ask me why *I* write essays, I'd say:



What about being creative? Some students tell me they think essay writing stifles their creativity.

Academic writing can often seem impersonal, and lacking in opportunities to do our own thing. Actually, certain essay assignments ask you explicitly to develop a more personal perspective on something: college application essays and personal statements are common examples.

In this book, I'll be concentrating on more discursive, analytical essays. These may not *feel* like creative assignments. But in fact, constructing an argument is as creative as constructing a story or a house. After all, in constructing an argument, you have to:

- create ideas from information;
- create arguments from ideas;
- create academic discourse to present your arguments; and
- create a conversation with your tutor and the academic community.

Your tutor may demand that your essay displays objectivity and contains hard evidence; but they also want you to say something new. Academic work can, and should be, excitingly creative.

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2 What is an essay?

Name: Date Period:

Key points and questions	Details
What's the subject? What's the question? What's the topic? What kind of argument am I using?	An essay does three things. - It addresses a topic. (What's my position?) - It answers a question. (The essay question, even if it doesn't look like a question!) - And it (usually) takes the form of an argument. An academic argument is made up of three elements. - A claim that you are arguing for - A reason to support that claim - Reasoning and evidence to link the reason to the claim Three types of argument: - truth (scientific); - deliberative (polemical); - evaluative (humanities). An essay is part of the academic conversation.

Summary

Think of an essay as a thought experiment. An essay takes the reader on a journey, from introduction to conclusion.

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The word 'essay' originally meant 'a trial, test or experiment'. (The French verb, *essayer*, means 'to try'.) In 1580, Michel de Montaigne published a large book of short pieces giving his opinions about various subjects, which he called *essais*. Seventeen years later, Francis Bacon published a smaller though no less influential collection, which he called *essays*.

And the name stuck.

Think of an essay as a thought experiment. An essay takes an idea on a journey; the best essays arrive somewhere interesting.

2.1 The three defining features of an essay

An essay does three things.

- It addresses a **topic**.
- It answers a **question**.
- And it (usually) takes the form of an **argument**.

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2.1.1 Finding your topic: where do you stand?

First, an essay addresses a **topic**.

Many textbooks will tell you that a topic is the essay's subject. That's not quite true. An essay's subject is simply what it's about: it's a label, like the label you might put on a box file, or the name you'd give to a folder on your computer.

An essay's topic is the position it takes on the subject. (The word derives from the Greek word *topos*, meaning 'place'.)

Your essay's topic expresses your view on the subject.

To find your topic, ask:

Suppose the subject of your essay is the French Revolution. To find potential topics for this subject, you could start by creating phrases beginning with the words 'why' or 'how'.

How the French Revolution began
Why the French Revolution collapsed into despotism
How the French Revolution influenced revolutionary movements elsewhere

If the subject of your essay is nuclear power, potential topics might be:

Why nuclear power has proved popular as a source of energy generation
How nuclear power compares with other forms of energy generation in terms of cost, environmental impact or social acceptability
How nuclear power technology has developed over the last twenty years

If you're writing a dissertation or a post-graduate thesis (for a PhD, for example), you'll be asked to choose your own topic: you may spend some time with your supervisor refining that topic. If you've been set an essay to write, then the topic will be indicated or suggested by the question you've been given.

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2.1.2 What question are you answering?

The problem is that, sometimes, the question doesn't *look* like a question. Many essay questions are in the form of instructions. These instructions are contained in **directive words**: for example, 'outline', 'compare and contrast' or – that word guaranteed to strike fear into the heart of any essay writer – 'discuss'.

We'll explore these directive words, and how to interpret them, in Chapter 4.

Your must answer the question. But you'll need to do more: you have to *support* that answer with an argument.

2.1.3 What do you mean, 'argument'?

We tend to use the word 'argument' to mean a disagreement. In this kind of argument, people exchange views, often in a heated, emotionally charged way. Everyday arguments of this kind often revolve around feelings or moral issues.

But we can also use the word 'argue' in the sense of 'making a case'. We use this meaning of the word for more formal situations: we might talk about a lawyer arguing her case in court, or a politician arguing for reduced taxes.

This is the kind of argument you need to construct in your essay. The argument should address the topic and answer the question.

An essay takes your reader on a journey, from introduction to conclusion.

Three elements of an argument

An academic argument is made up of three elements.

- A claim that you are arguing for
- A reason to support that claim
- Reasoning and evidence to link the reason to the claim

In its simplest form, an argument takes the form:

[Claim] *because* [Reason].

We use arguments all the time.

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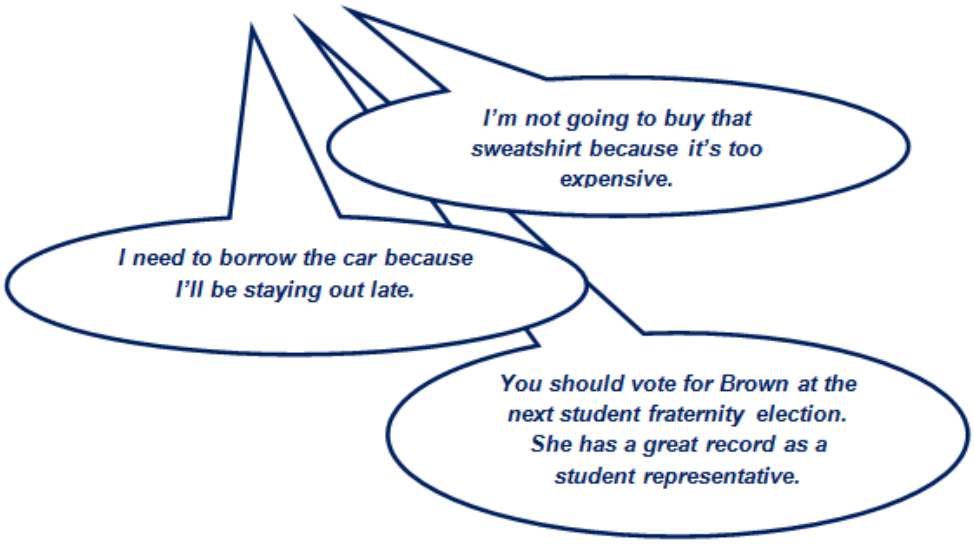

Argumentation is a life skill. If you can argue well, you'll be able to persuade others. But effective argumentation isn't just about winning arguments and getting your own way. The more skilfully you can argue, the better you become at thinking critically, weighing evidence and making good choices. The more effectively you can argue, the more easily you'll be able to see through the phoney arguments of marketers, ideologues and politicians.

In the end, being able to argue well is an essential part of being a good citizen.

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Academic arguments

In academic writing, we usually call an argument's claim a **thesis** or **thesis statement**; and we'll use those words in this book. A well constructed essay uses two elements to support its thesis statement:

- **reasoning**, which presents ideas in a logical structure; and
- **evidence**, information suggesting or demonstrating that the ideas are credible or true.

If you can create a clear thesis statement, and support it with logically connected ideas and carefully presented evidence, your essay will stand out from all those essays that are nothing more than collections of facts.

And that's the kind of essay that this book will help you to produce.

A thesis statement can be as simple as:

A flame will cause a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen to react explosively to form water.

To support a claim like that, you'd use evidence such as:

In an experiment, a flame was applied to a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen and the reaction was noted.
[supported by an explanation of the experimental process]

Claims can also be more complex. To argue this claim, for example:

The policy of apartheid in South Africa was unsustainable,
given the actions of the government in maintaining it.

– you might create a connected argument along these lines (with suitable evidence, indicated in square brackets).

In the last two centuries, political revolutions have always come about as a result of the government making and then removing concessions to a rebellious social or political group.
[evidence: list of examples]

The South African government acted in exactly this way in the 1960s and 1970s,
making and then withdrawing concessions to the majority population.
[evidence: list of examples]

Therefore, given these events and their similarity to events in other revolutions, the end of the apartheid system in South Africa can be seen to be inevitable.

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Three types of academic argument

An argument in an essay is usually one of three kinds.

- An argument claiming that something is true.

  Arguments using *truth claims* are most common in the sciences. Most papers in scientific journals use experimental evidence or research to support a claim that some aspect of the world is true.

  In science, of course, no claim should ever be regarded as absolutely true. The importance of a truth claim is not that it's true, but that this is a new truth, not previously discovered.

  Rats that have had their adrenal glands removed become less aggressive.
  Regular ingestion of aspirin has been shown to lower the risk of heart attacks.
  'Gravitational lensing' is a previously unknown phenomenon that
  bends light in the presence of strong gravitational fields.

  Papers involving arguments of this kind usually don't carry the name 'essay'; we're more likely to call them 'reports' – or, simply, 'papers'.

- An argument claiming that something should happen.

  Arguments of this kind (we could call them 'polemical') are based on deliberative claims: a claim seeking to persuade its audience to choose a course of action. (We call them 'deliberative claims' because we're deliberating what to do.)

  All political arguments are polemical. You might be called upon to make a polemical argument in an essay, especially in courses on philosophy, politics, management or citizenship. Such arguments cannot be based on experimental evidence alone; they will also involve appeals to values, beliefs and morals.

  The United States should lower the minimum age of alcohol consumption.
  The rights of women should be strengthened in countries
  where they have traditionally been weak.
  Capital punishment is unacceptable in any civilized society.

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- An argument making an evaluative claim.

  Evaluative claims, like truth claims, propose that something is true. Unlike truth claims, however, they cannot be decided by experiment or measurement; they demand that we evaluate evidence: that we judge and discriminate it according to other bodies of knowledge, values or priorities.

  Evaluative claims will always be provisional; they can never be settled once and for all. Evaluative claims create debate; they often morph into new claims as new evidence emerges, as research priorities shift, and even as fashions change. Sometimes an evaluative claim seeks to bring out some new meaning in the subject matter of the essay.

  Evaluative arguments are probably the most common kind of argument in the humanities: literary criticism, history and art history. They crop up, also, in the 'soft' sciences: psychology, economics, geography.

  Threats to order and its reaffirmation are at the centre of the tragic use of myth.
  Mass education nearly always acts to reduce social inequalities.
  Humanistic psychology relies more on categories of perceived need than on observed drives.

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Evaluative arguments are overwhelmingly the stuff of essays. (Remember Montaigne's 'short pieces giving his opinions about various subjects'?) An essay, almost by definition, deals in arguments that can never be settled once and for all; they form part of the ongoing debates that are the lifeblood of academic life.

Most of the essay questions we'll explore in this book are evaluative.

What about a 'balanced' argument?

Students are often told by their tutors that they should provide a 'balanced' argument. The term can often cause confusion, especially if those same tutors tell them to produce a 'strong' argument. How can an argument be both balanced *and* persuasive? How can it look at both sides of an issue – or all sides, if you can see more than two – and, at the same time, pursue *one* point of view rigorously to a conclusion?

In an effort to reconcile these two needs, students can fall into one of two traps. Either they write a polemic suggesting that anyone who thinks differently from them is an idiot; or they sit on the fence and produce an essay that says nothing very convincing at all ("On the one hand, World War II was a terrible disaster; on the other hand, much good came out of it.")

An academic argument *can* be both balanced and strong. The trick is to consider viewpoints other than your own, acknowledge their plausibility, and show how, in your view, they are inadequate or flawed. Your own argument will be much stronger if you take on the opinions of others and find reasonable ways to counter them. If you flatly ignore those other views, you lay yourself open to the legitimate criticism that you haven't even considered what others have thought and said about the issue.

And that's just not the academic way.

2.2 Joining the academic conversation

'Balanced' arguments, in this sense, are at the heart of academic life. That's because academic conversations are always debates. Academics take up positions and defend them; they respond to the ideas of other academics, by trying either to defeat them or (perhaps more rarely) refine or improve them. Out of these debates, new ideas emerge, grow or wither away. It's a conversation – not always friendly or respectful – from which greater understanding will hopefully emerge.

Your essay is part of an academic conversation.

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When you write an essay, you're being invited to join the debate. By setting you a question, your tutor is asking you to make a claim. Indeed, that question may ask you to examine someone else's claim and respond to it. You could do so by:

- defending it;
- refuting it; or
- refining it.

Whatever you do, you'll be expected to make a claim of your own. And you'll be asked to provide an argument, and evidence, to support that claim.

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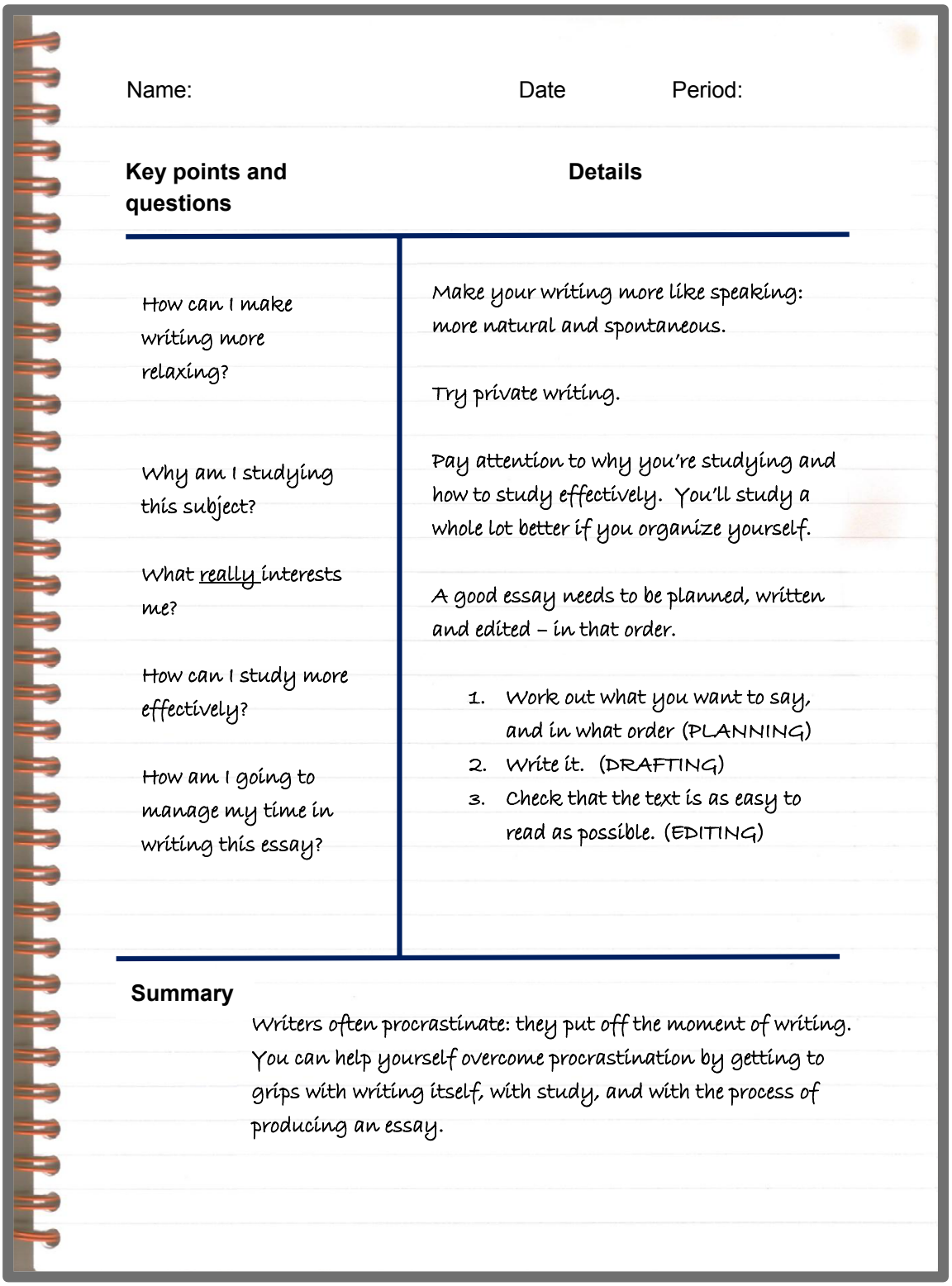
3 Get going!



Name: Date Period:

Key points and questions	Details
How can I make writing more relaxing?	Make your writing more like speaking: more natural and spontaneous. Try private writing.
Why am I studying this subject? What <u>really</u> interests me?	Pay attention to why you're studying and how to study effectively. You'll study a whole lot better if you organize yourself.
How can I study more effectively?	A good essay needs to be planned, written and edited – in that order.
How am I going to manage my time in writing this essay?	1. Work out what you want to say, and in what order (PLANNING) 2. Write it. (DRAFTING) 3. Check that the text is as easy to read as possible. (EDITING)

Summary

Writers often procrastinate: they put off the moment of writing. You can help yourself overcome procrastination by getting to grips with writing itself, with study, and with the process of producing an essay.

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Eager to start? Have you tidied your desk, switched off your phone and cleared your diary for the next two weeks?

Or are you putting it off? Are you finding every possible excuse *not* to start work?

Do you find yourself:

- ignoring the assignment and secretly hoping it will go away;
- deciding to do something important rather than working on the essay (like cleaning or exercising); or
- taking a short break that mysteriously becomes a long one?

Even when you *are* working on an essay, you might be mismanaging your time. For example, you might be suffering from 'analysis paralysis': putting off the moment to write and doing just a bit more research (after all, there's *always* something else you can research).

Or you might find yourself drafting and redrafting your introduction, and never progressing beyond that first paragraph. (Personal confession: I have this problem. It helps, sometimes, to plunge in and write something in the middle of the essay, simply to escape the horror of finding that first sentence.)

Do you, perhaps, view the whole task with something approaching dread? If so: you're not alone. Most professional writers admit that the hardest part of the job is starting.

3.1 Procrastination: the art of putting it off

Let's think about possible reasons why you're putting off the task. Those reasons might be related to:

- the assignment;
- the challenges of study; or
- the act of writing.

First, what's your current attitude to this assignment? Does it excite you? Do you feel that it's relevant to your other goals or interests in life? Does it seem overwhelmingly complicated? Or vague? Perhaps feel you should have studied more. Maybe you know so much that you can't think where to begin!

What are you feeling about your potential readers? How have they responded to your work in the past? How does writing at college compare to writing assignments at school? Maybe school was some time ago, and you're returning to essay writing after a break.

Secondly, how do you feel about study? College study differs a lot from school work, although your final years at school may have prepared you for the responsibilities of self-managed study. Check out your current morale levels. If they feel a bit low, we can help. (Read on!)

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You may feel that there's simply not enough time for this assignment. If so, you're in very good company: *every* writer feels the pressure of time. But college life makes many demands on our time; we must manage that time well.

A lot of writer's block lies in our attitude to writing itself. Writing, after all, isn't nearly as natural to us as speaking. Most of us have no trouble learning to speak; but learning to write takes years. And different kinds of writing carry different challenges. Essay-writing may seem hard; but do you get writer's block texting your friends?

In particular, writing in an academic style may bother you. Perhaps you feel you have to imitate the style of the books and articles you're studying: a style that can often come across as difficult, uncomfortable, or even pompous.

This is great! We can find all sorts of *very* good reasons to put off writing that essay. Now that we've justified our procrastination – what shall we do about it?

Let's look at these factors before looking at the essay itself. And we'll take them in reverse order:

- getting to grips with writing;
- getting to grips with study; and
- getting to grips with the assignment.

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3.2 Getting to grips with writing

We're not *born* with writer's block; we *learn* it, through our own negative experiences of writing.

That's the good news. Because, if we learn to be anxious about writing, we can learn to become more relaxed about it.

3.2.1 Speaking and writing

We can overcome our fear of writing by bringing it closer to speaking.

Most of us have no difficulty speaking, at least in private with friends and family. Speaking sometimes becomes more difficult: when you need to say something unpleasant or awkward to someone, for example; or when you need to speak in public. And, on those occasions, you might turn to writing: perhaps you send a text or an email when speaking would be embarrassing; or you write notes to help you make a presentation.

But when we start writing, if *feels* different from speaking. And that's hardly surprising. Writing differs from speaking in lots of ways.

Speaking	Writing
Natural	Artificial
Universal: almost everybody learns how to do it	Only those with access to education learn to do it
Social	Solitary
Spontaneous	Can be planned and edited before the reader sees it
Speaking is local. We speak using our local dialect, using local pronunciation and vocabulary, which contributes to our sense of identity	Writing is global. It needs to be understood by people with many dialects: it therefore uses standardized forms of grammar, spelling, punctuation and vocabulary, all of which make writing less personal
Speakers use visual and vocal techniques to support their words: • voice (volume, pitch, pace) and • body language (eyes, gestures, posture)	Writers substitute: • verbal stylistic devices for vocal inflections: rhythm, rhyme, figures of speech; and • formatting (the physical layout of the text on the page or screen) to substitute for body language
Speakers pause and emphasize	Writers punctuate
Speakers can see the effect of their speaking immediately: listeners can gesture, interrupt, question and comment	Writers cannot usually see the immediate effect of their writing
Speakers can check their listener's understanding	Writers need to guess, research or assume their audience's knowledge, values, beliefs and interests
Speakers can repeat or adapt what they say to increase understanding	Writers have only one chance to communicate
Speech is usually informal, digressive and repetitive	Writing more formal and compact. It progresses more logically and sequentially
Speakers use simpler sentences and a limited range of connectors: usually *and* and *but*.	Writers use more complex sentences with more complex connectors: *however*, *therefore*, *although*, *if*, *consequently*, *in addition*…

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Writing is less personal than speaking: the way we speak denotes who we are. Writing, in contrast, is essentially impersonal. You'll experience this tension between the personal and the impersonal when you write an essay.

3.2.2 Putting your thoughts into words

We can begin to take command of writing by making it *feel* more like speaking. It may never feel as natural as speaking, but we can make it feel more spontaneous.

With practice.

Imagine running the 100m race without having practised. Imagine having to play a violin sonata or a rock gig without practising. Now: imagine trying to write this essay without practising writing.

Of course, you need to practise in private. No athlete would want to be seen practising in front of 20,000 people in the stadium. No musician would want to stand in Carnegie Hall practising scales. And it's the same with writing. The essay you'll be working on is public. If it's the only kind of writing you ever do – well, is it surprising that you're feeling nervous?

Now imagine something called 'private writing'. No reader apart from yourself; no pressure of deadlines; no grades. Private writing can be relaxing and fun. It can also help you sort out your ideas and your feelings.

Here are four ideas to get you going.

Take notes. Jot things down: your own ideas, things you hear people say, sentences in books or magazines you read. To do this, of course, you'll need something to note with: you might put notes onto your mobile phone; you might use envelopes and napkins.

Before long, you'll probably feel the need of a notebook. So:

Start a commonplace book. Get into the habit of carrying a little notebook and pencil around with you. (I strongly advise a pencil rather than a pen; I've ruined too much clothing with pens that leak or break as I sit on them.) Use a notebook that can fit into a pocket, which will survive everyday battering.

Shopping for that notebook can be a pleasure in itself. Treat yourself to something different, but don't spend too much money.

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The idea of a commonplace book goes back a long way. It was Erasmus, in the early 16th century, who suggested that students should use them. He advised dividing the notebook into sections relating to 'things of particular note in human affairs'. You might not go that far, but collecting good bits of writing and speaking – and ideas you hear, or have yourself – is enjoyable and useful. After all, you might want to remember them, or imitate them. And it makes you feel like a writer.

Incidentally, the name 'commonplace book' derives from the idea of topics – from the Greek word *topos*, meaning 'place'. A 'common place' is a common topic: the kind of argument that you could find useful in different situations. A commonplace book is, ideally, the place where you note down those killer arguments for instant retrieval next time you're stuck for an answer. We'll be looking at topics later, when we assess the essay question.

Write Morning Pages. These are a bit like morning exercises: yoga for your writing. The term has been coined by Julia Cameron, in her book, *The Artist's Way*. Here's how she describes them on her website:

> *Morning Pages are three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness writing, done first thing in the morning.* ***There is no wrong way to do Morning Pages*** *– they are not high art. They are not even "writing." They are about anything and everything that crosses your mind– and they are for your eyes only. Morning Pages provoke, clarify, comfort, cajole, prioritize and synchronize the day at hand. Do not over-think Morning Pages: just put three pages of anything on the page… and then do three more pages tomorrow.*

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Buster Benson, a Californian businessman, tried out Morning Pages.

> *I've used the exercise as a great way to think out loud without having to worry about half-formed ideas, random tangents, private stuff, and all the other things in our heads that we often filter out before ever voicing them or writing about them. It's a daily brain dump. Over time, I've found that it's also very helpful as a tool to get thoughts going that have become stuck, or to help get to the bottom of a rotten mood.*

Buster was so inspired by this idea that he created an online version called 750 words.

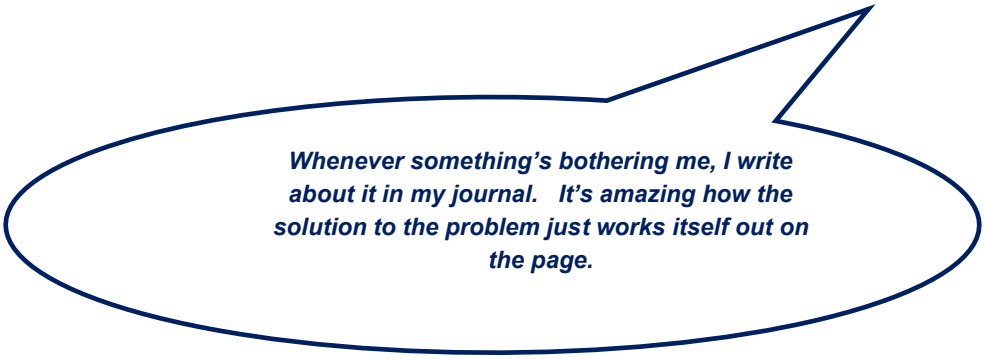
Need a nudge? Try one of these questions for size.

- What's your main goal today?
- What do you have to do this morning?
- What's your favourite movie? Why?
- What was the most amusing thing that happened yesterday?
- What's on your mind?

Start a journal. This is a slightly more formal, organized version of Morning Pages. Every day, at a time chosen by you, write down whatever you like in your journal: what's happened, what you're thinking, ideas and observations. It should take no more than a quarter of an hour; limit the time you take so that you've a better chance of writing your journal every day.

When you're writing privately, imagine speaking. Don't try to be literary; listen to what your inner voice tells you and *write it down.* The more you do, the more confident you'll feel about writing – and the better your writing will become.

Private writing also helps us *think* better. One student told me:



Writing isn't just a way of recording our thoughts. It's also a way of *creating* them.

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3.3 Getting to grips with study

This isn't a book about study skills. We're focusing on writing essays. But clearly every essay contributes to a wider study programme, so we should pay some attention to why you're studying, and how to study effectively.

As we progress from school to college, we learn that we must take responsibility for our own learning. You'll be studying a wide range of topics, so you'll need to decide where to focus your attention. You're working to deadlines but nobody else sets the timetable; *you* are responsible for your own schedule. And you're studying a good deal on your own. If you need support, you'll be expected to ask for it, not wait for someone to offer it.

Look at the big picture. Review the course and work out its long-term strategy. Create a calendar and mark all the key targets – including deadlines for essays! Break larger tasks into smaller ones and allocate time to each. (We'll look at how to do that for essays in the next section.) When times get busy, write regular 'to do' lists to help you focus on the day ahead. Set up an effective filing system so that you don't waste time looking for material that you've been studying. Find your way around the faculty, the library and other routes to academic information.

Identify your best time of day for study.

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If you feel that you're missing the support of a weekly timetable, create your own. Vary it each week. Work out your weekly timetable by checking the calendar, reviewing deadlines and clearing your daily 'to do' lists. Map out your timetable for the week, including extracurricular activities and rewarding yourself with some well-earned rest and recuperation.

There's a great downloadable study timetable here.

You'll study a whole lot better if you organize yourself. Find a good place to study and make it study-friendly. Get supplies of basic equipment – pens, notepads, sticky notes, filing cards for reference, batteries for the computer mouse – so that you're not wasting time rushing to the store for replacements.

Feeling low?

Study is hard work. Morale is bound to dip every so often.

Take heart. Here are some ways to make study less burdensome and more fun.

- **What have you achieved so far?** Sit down and make a list. Don't compare yourself with that brilliant swat who's the star of every seminar. Focus on *your* successes.
- **What aspects of study do you enjoy?** Make a second list of all the aspects of study that you like, and that you do well. Check that you are giving enough time to those activities.
- **What bits of study *don't* you enjoy?** That's a third list. Be really specific here; don't generalize. For example, don't just write 'reading'; which books or articles in particular are a pain to read? Now: how could you do those things more effectively, or more efficiently? Is there anyone you could ask for some help or ideas?
- **Organize!** Tidy your desk, your room, your notes and your timetables. Update your current 'to do' list.
- **Talk!** Chat to your friends and to other students on your course. Talk to your tutor. If it feels serious, check out your college's pastoral system. It really does help to talk: it will show you that there's almost certainly nothing odd going on here. You're a normal person facing normal problems; the solutions that other people have found will probably help you, too.
- **Who's in charge here?** Why are you studying this course? Who's going to get the benefit? Who's becoming a more competent, knowledgeable, skilled person as a result of this work? Who matters?

  You.

Study is part of the academic conversation. It works best if you think of it as finding out what others have said, working out what you think about it, and deciding what *you* want to say. So:

- Reflect on what you read and work out what you've understood.
- Join in with classroom conversations and seminars. It will help you to find your own voice and contribution to the academic conversation.
- Review the main learning points of lectures and seminars and note them down. In particular, note down what *you* said in seminars and how others responded.
- Make notes systematically, selectively and creatively. Rework notes for essays and other assignments.
- Reward yourself with weekly review sessions where you look back over what you've learnt, what's interested you and how it fits together.
- Think about how writing can help you learn.

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3.4 Essay writing in three stages: plan; draft; edit

Getting to grips with the assignment, of course, involves both of the factors we've just discussed: writing and time management.

Remember one of the key differences between speaking and writing?

- Speaking is (usually) spontaneous: we simply say what we think, respond immediately to what someone else says, and add new ideas.
- Writing, in contrast, is (usually) more considered. We need to work out what we want to say, say it, and then check that we've said it as clearly as possible.

Speaking tends to just happen. Writing can just happen too (think of Julia Cameron's Morning Pages). But a good essay needs to be planned, written and edited.

1. We need to work out what we want to say, and in what order: that's planning.
2. Then we need to write it. (Call it drafting.)
3. Then we need to check that what we've written is as easy to read as possible: that's editing.

Here's a diagram of that three-stage process. The numbers in square brackets are the chapters and sections of this book where you'll find more detail about each step.

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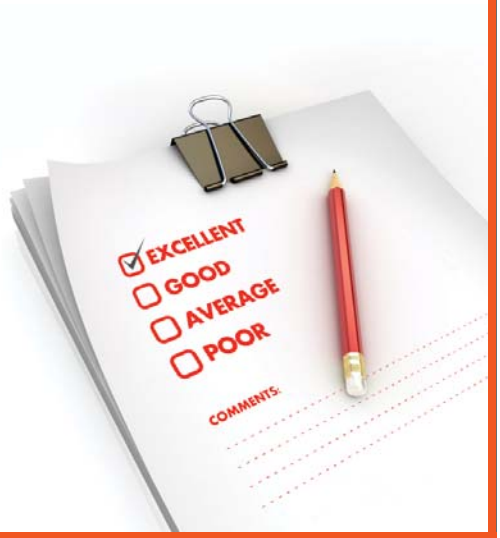

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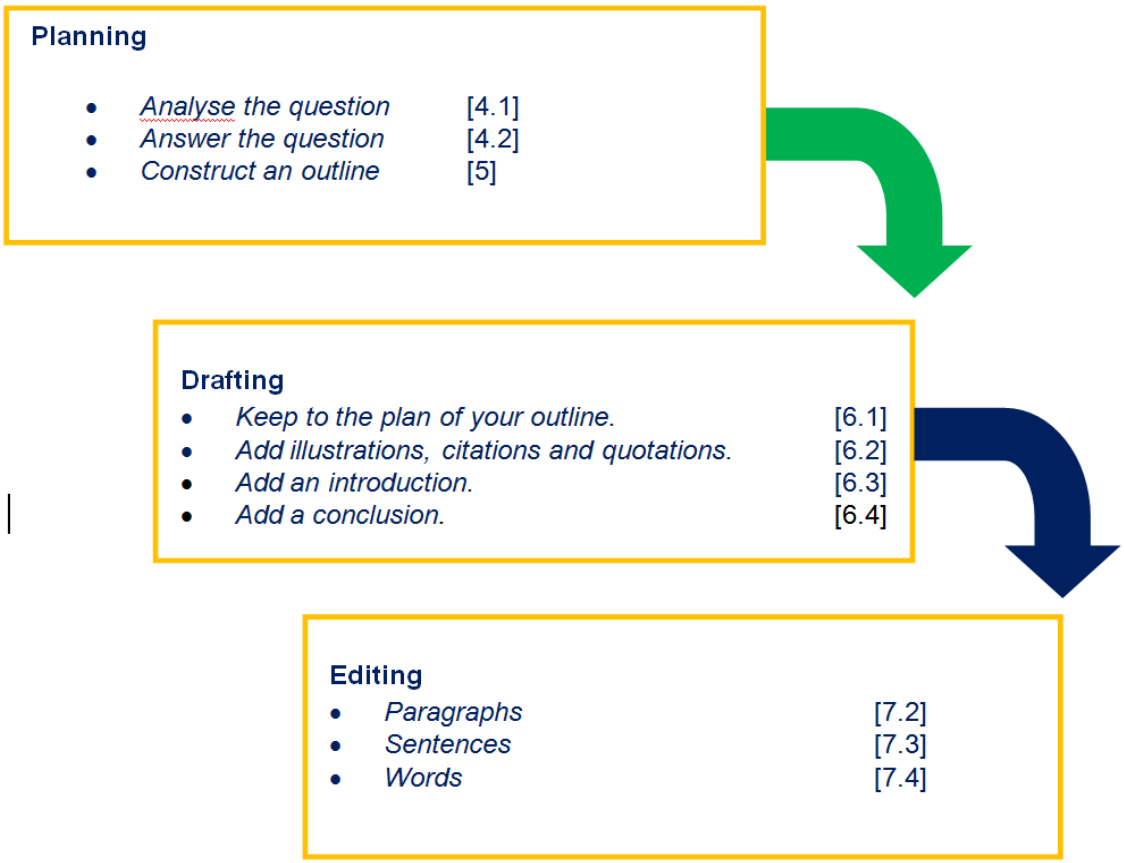

Try to keep each stage of this process separate. In other words, *try* to finish planning your essay before you draft it. And *try* to avoid editing your work until you've finished drafting.

You'll probably find, despite this advice, that you'll never quite manage to keep these activities apart. You'll have to revert to planning at some point while drafting; you'll almost inevitably edit a bit as you draft; and so on. That's fine. But at least keep these three stages separate *in your mind*: don't try to do more than one thing at a time.

And how long should you spend on each stage?

Students often ask me this question, and of course it's impossible to answer accurately. I usually wriggle out by answering: 'it depends.'

I do think that planning and editing should take far longer than drafting. The quality of your essay – the grade it will be awarded – depends on the quality of your ideas and the quality of your writing. Planning helps you find high-quality ideas; editing helps you create high-quality prose. The more time you spend on planning and editing, the better your essay will be, and the higher the grade it will get.

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Drafting should be fast. Always aim to draft quickly: imagine speaking to your audience, and write down what you would say to them.

Learn to type!

We'll talk more about drafting in Chapter 6. For the moment, let me make just one suggestion.

Learn ten-finger typing.

Once you can type properly, you'll be able to transfer your thoughts to the screen much more easily. And that will improve your writing. So, if you don't already type fast, take a little time to learn. It should take you about four weeks to achieve 70 or 80 words a minute; it will be one of the most useful skills you'll ever learn.

Type "learn ten finger typing" into your search engine: there are plenty of free programs to get you going and several excellent programs at a very reasonable cost.

Take a look at your study timetable. When's the deadline for this essay? How many working days does that give you? (Allow some time off, if you can.)

Now: split that time period into three sections, roughly in these proportions.

Planning	**40%**
Drafting	**20%**
Editing	**40%**

How does that schedule look to you? If you think you need more time to plan, stretch it; but other parts of the schedule will be squeezed as a result.

It's better to have a plan than not to have one. Every writer will tell you that there's never enough time to write; we all want our work to be as good as we can make it, and to achieve good results in a tight schedule is a challenge. On the other hand, deadlines force us to make choices and stop – well, procrastinating!

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4 Answering the question

Name: Date Period:

Key points and questions	Details
What's the essay's scope?	Identify the essay's SCOPE and TOPIC
What's its topic?	Essays both ARGUE and EXPLAIN The question will contain DIRECTIVE WORDS You'll almost certainly be asked to argue. Most arguments are supported with explanation.
Am I arguing or explaining?	There are SIX patterns of explanation.
What's my thesis statement?	THESIS STATEMENT • one idea in a single sentence • directly answer sthe essay question • makes a disputable claim
How do I research and record my research?	Research is ITERATIVE: research;; compare notes with working thesis; refine thesis; etc...
What's my refined thesis?	CORNELL NOTES ARE GOOD Try an ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY REFINED THESIS • the SUBJECT of the essay • a PRECISE CLAIM about that subject • a GROUND PLAN

Summary The first step in planning your essay is to answer the question. To do that, you'll need to:

- understand the question: its scope and the topic you're addressing; and
- answer the question: by creating, testing and refining a thesis statement.

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The first step in planning your essay is to answer the question. To do that, you'll need to:

- understand the question: its scope and the topic you're addressing; and
- answer the question: by creating, testing and refining a thesis statement.

4.1 Understanding the question

Why is the tutor asking you a question in the first place? Why not simply ask you to write about what you've been studying: slavery in 19th century America, or antibacterial agents, or the use of metaphor in Renaissance sonnets?

Because academic research always focuses on an issue to be resolved. Good research never simply looks at a subject area; good research has an objective. It wants to answer questions.

Research is searching carefully, with a method, so that you can answer a question.
It is wider than finding out a fact and more focused than reading widely around a subject.
[from the British Library website]

Questions force us to *think*, rather than simply hoarding information. It's by asking questions that we make sense of information and find ways to use it. Your tutor wants to see evidence that you can think.

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We need to scrutinize the essay question for two things:

- the *scope* of the question: what parts of the subject you should be focusing on; and
- the *topic*: the approach that your tutor wants you to take about the question.

Identifying the scope and the topic of your essay will help you develop your strategy in planning it.

The essay question contains information to help you plan. But you might need to search for it and think about it: sometimes, it's written in a kind of academic code; and words can code for different things in different subjects.

4.1.1 Mapping the scope of the question

Identifying the scope of the essay question is usually fairly straightforward. Are you being asked about food aid in South America or Asia? About the implications of e-learning in mathematics or in history? About Cervantes or Shakespeare?

Read the question – more than once – and note down the words that define the scope of the essay. Look in particular for those words that *restrict* or *focus* the area you're being asked to investigate. Some of those words will be in code:

in the context of
in the light of
with reference to

These code phrases indicate that you're being asked to put a kind of frame around the essay's subject. You're almost certainly being asked to think about the *relationship* between the essay's central subject and something else: another subject of a similar kind; the subject's historical or geographical setting; other ideas in the same field; or what other scholars have said about the subject. That relationship, whatever it is, might well define the scope of your essay.

4.1.2 Identifying the topic

Your essay's topic, you'll remember, is the *position you're taking on the subject*. (We discussed this in section 2.1.1.) We're trying to establish *how* we're supposed to answer the question, not simply what we should be writing *about*.

How will you approach the essay's subject? What will your essay *do*?

Here's the top-line answer: your essay will **argue and explain.**

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The clues to the topic are in the essay question. The question will contain **directive words** that suggest how you should answer.

Directive words

It's very likely that your essay question will contain one or more of these words or phrases.

account for	**analyse**	**apply**
argue	**assess**	**balance**
clarify	**compare**	**contrast**
critique	**define**	**demonstrate**
describe	**discuss**	**estimate**
evaluate	**explain**	**identify**
illustrate	**justify**	**outline**
prove	**relate**	**research**
respond	**review**	**state**
summarize	**support**	**synthesise**
trace		

These are directive words: they give you directions on how to answer the question. Bear in mind that some of these words can mean different things in different disciplines and contexts. If in doubt, check with a subject-specific dictionary, or with your tutor.

The directive words are a kind of code. The topic of your essay may not be obvious from the directive words in the question. To *demonstrate*, for example, can mean different things in physics, mathematics, history and English.

Fear not. We can crack the code. To do so, we need two clues.

Clue #1

With a few exceptions, you're almost certainly being asked to construct an argument.

(The exceptions might include laboratory reports, experimental papers, or papers based exclusively on statistical or other data.)

Even if the words 'argue' or 'argument' are not in the question, it's reasonable to assume that you'll be asked to take a position and defend it. Your tutor may themselves assume that you understand this and not emphasize the need to construct an argument. If in doubt, ask.

We've said (in section 2.1.3) that most essays present one of three kinds of argument.

- An argument making a **truth claim**.
- An argument making a **deliberative claim**.
- An argument making an **evaluative claim**.

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It might be immediately clear from your essay question which kind of argument you're being asked for. An essay question in a scientific discipline, for example, is likely to ask for a 'truth' claim. A question in a field like philosophy or politics might be asking you to be polemical and propose a particular course of action. Many essay questions in the humanities or arts subjects will be of the third kind: they will be asking you to evaluate some aspect of the material you've been studying, in relation to its context, or in relation to what others have said about it.

So: assume, unless you have very good reasons for thinking otherwise, that your overall topic is argument.

Directive words: argument

All of these directive words might suggest that you are being required to argue. Note that some of these words can have different meanings in essay questions. If in doubt, ask your tutor.

account for	*give reasons for*
argue	*make a claim and support it*
assess	*summarize your opinion and measure it against something*
balance	*assess two or more viewpoints and evaluate them against different criteria (perhaps with weightings given to each criterion), to decide which viewpoint is most convincing*
critique	*identify an argument or position and refute it; create a counterargument*
demonstrate	*give proof or evidence to show that a proposition is true*
estimate	*argue by calculating or determining the likelihood of something*
evaluate	*appraise the worth of something in the light of its truth or usefulness; assess an argument and determine its validity (similar to 'critique')*
justify	*create an argument to support a position or claim and answer any objections or counterarguments*
prove	*argue that a claim is true or certain; provide strong evidence (and examples)*
respond	*counter a position or argument*
review	*evaluate and give your judgement*
support	*find reasons for a claim*

Another very common directive phrase is this one:

To what extent…?

It might not look like it, but this phrase is also an invitation to argue. Think about it: how can you answer the question 'To what extent…?' There are, basically, three possible answers:

Completely.
Not at all.
Partly/to some extent.

Having decided on your answer – your claim – your essay would need to justify it. And justifying means arguing: supporting your claim with reasoning and evidence.

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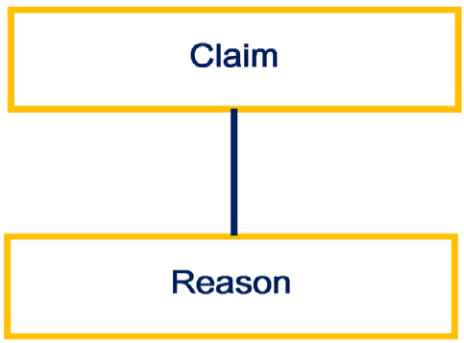
Clue #2

Whatever kind of argument you're constructing, you'll almost always need to support it with explanation.

An argument, you'll recall, always looks like this:

[Claim] *because* [Reason].

We could draw the argument as a diagram. (It often helps to draw your arguments like this, so that you can see their structure more easily.)



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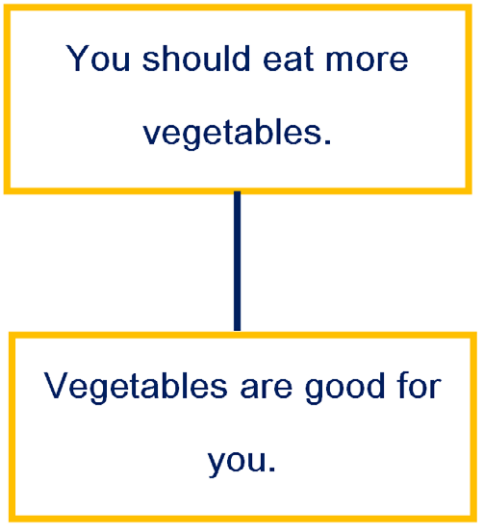
Suppose you wanted to convince me to eat more vegetables. You might choose this argument.



Immediately, in order to expand on your reason, you'll need to explain *how* vegetables are good for me: they supply me with essential vitamins and minerals, they give me trace elements, they are usually relatively low in calories, and so on.

You support your argument with explanation.

(Incidentally, note that the claim in this argument is *deliberative*. It's about influencing my choice of action. The reason in the argument is a *truth* claim: if 'good for you' means 'beneficial to human health', we can expect your explanations to offer scientific, quantitative evidence to support it as an objective truth.)

In your essay, you may well support your claim with more than one reason. Each of those reasons will probably require some kind of explanation.

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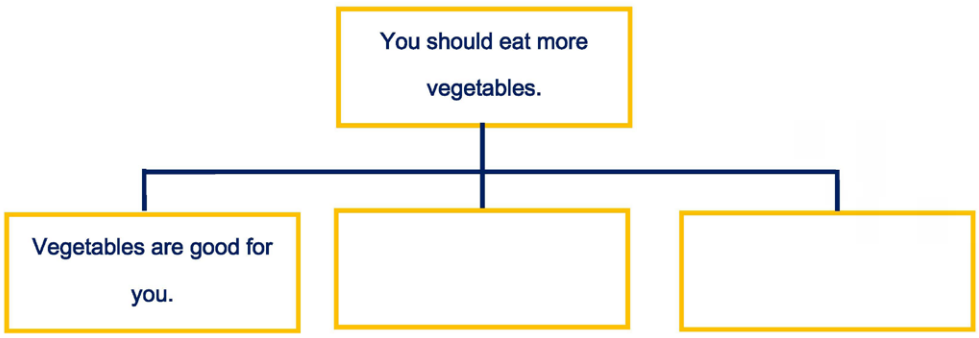
Finding reasons: an exercise in arguing

Here's a game for you. Take that same claim that we've just looked at and find two more reasons to support it.



Now ask yourself two questions.

1. How valid are those reasons? (What kind of logic and evidence would you use to support them?)
2. How credible are they – not for you, but for the person you're seeking to persuade? (And what would make them more credible?)

This is exactly the kind of work you'll be doing in developing your argument for your essay. You'll need to find reasons to support your thesis statement, and then decide how valid and credible they are.

Patterns of explanation

We can explain in different ways.

For example, suppose we've been asked this question.

Is Euripides' play *Hippolytus* capable of being produced successfully on the modern stage?

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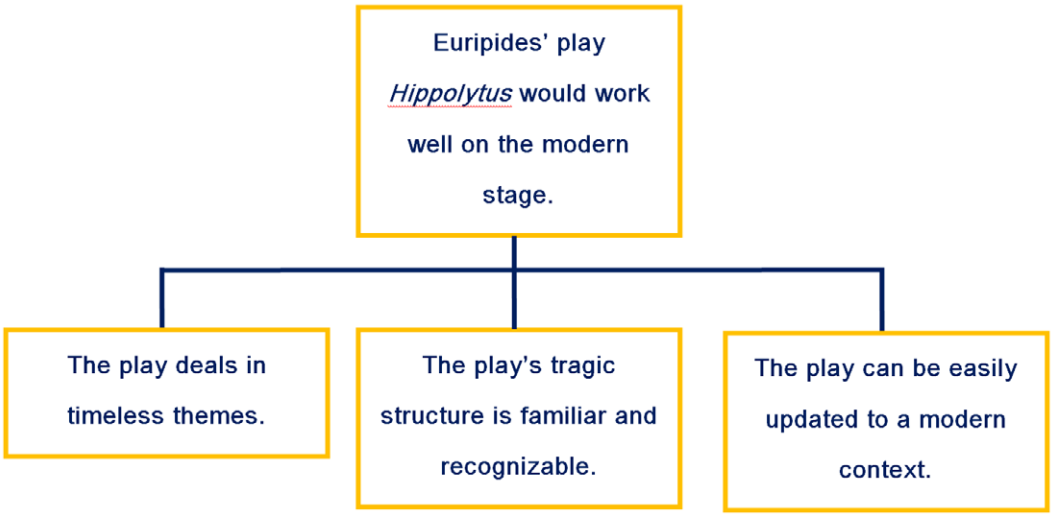
We might construct an argument that looks something like this.



Notice how we're using different *patterns of explanation* to support our argument.

- For our first reason, we would probably *list* the timeless themes: love, jealousy, religious fervor, the conflict between passion and social order, and so on.
- For our second reason, we might *define* tragedy and then show how this play conforms to that structure. (Of course, we might have to *compare* our definition of tragedy to that of the ancient Greeks.)
- For our third reason, we might *compare* the situation in this ancient Greek drama to modern political situations or psychological crises.

So how many patterns of explanation are there? The answer: six.

- **Listing examples**
- **Categorizing examples into groups**
- **Defining a term**
- **Comparison and contrast**
- **Process analysis**
- **Cause and effect – including consequences**

The directive words in your essay question may suggest one or more of these patterns as topics for your answer.

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Directive words: explanation

All of these directive words might suggest that you are being required to explain. Note that some of these words can have different meanings in essay questions. If in doubt, ask your tutor.

Lists of examples

apply	*use examples to show how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation*
demonstrate	*possibly similar to 'apply', if giving a list of examples*
explain	*give examples of how something happened*
identify	*point out examples of something*
illustrate	*give descriptive examples to support a point*

Categorizing examples into groups

analyse	*break into parts (might also imply 'challenge information'; see 'critique')*
relate	*show how different examples are grouped together*
synthesise	*assemble elements into a whole; create a model or theory by categorizing elements*

Defining a term

define	*show what class an object belongs to; identify features that distinguish it from all other members of its class*
clarify	*define a term and develop into a fuller explanation*

Comparison and contrast

compare	*show how two or more things are similar*
contrast	*show how two or more things differ*
relate	*compare and/or contrast two or more things*

Process analysis

demonstrate	*could mean 'show how something works or happens'*
trace	*could mean 'show how something operates'*

Cause and effect

account for	*show how something came about*
trace	*explain a sequence of cause and effect; how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form*

Some directive words are extremely vague. You'll need to work out their meaning entirely from their context in the question.

Perhaps the most dangerous directive word of all is one of the most common: 'discuss'. That word gives very little explicit direction. We would need to probe the question further, armed with our six patterns of explanation, to see how we might find our topic.

The question might be giving you a very open brief, to deal with the topic in whatever way you wish.

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For example:

> **Discuss the values of a typical liberal democratic party in 21st-century Europe.**

Where is the argument here? Perhaps there is none. 'Discuss the values' suggests an explanation by *listing*: we assemble the values and work through them, one by one. That word 'typical' is interesting, however. Do we need to *define* the word 'liberal'? How many political parties in Europe conform to that definition? Is there a *category* of liberal parties? How do they *compare*? The different patterns of explanation are suggesting a path of research.

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Other words in the essay question may hint at the kind of argument you're being asked to construct. Those clues might be in a quotation. For example:

> **"Whilst all major European powers bear a share of responsibility for the commencement of hostilities in 1914, the largest must be allotted to Austria-Hungary." Discuss.**

This sounds like an invitation to argue, either in favour of the statement, or against it. How might we decide which argument to pursue? Perhaps by explaining the *causes* of the war in 1914, and then *comparing* or *contrasting* the involvement of different European powers?

This essay question suggests a different approach.

> **Discuss how social psychological knowledge could be misused with negative consequences for people in society.**

The wording here suggests a *cause-and-effect* approach ('with negative consequences'), perhaps combined with a *list of examples* ('discuss how' seems to imply a list of 'ways in which').

Use the patterns of argument and explanation we've explored here as lenses through which to view your essay question. They can provide valuable hints to help guide your research and frame your thesis statement.

Directive words: danger!

If you see any of these words in your essay question, probe further.

describe	**discuss**	**explain**
outline	**research**	**review**
summarize		

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4.2 Creating a thesis statement

Your thesis statement will make a claim, which the rest of your essay will support.

Your thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. It's the output of all that studying and researching you've been doing, guided by the topic analysis we've just discussed. Having done that work, you'll probably have a working thesis in mind: a basic idea that you think you can support with material drawn from your studies. We can call it a 'working thesis' because it will almost certainly need adjusting and refining as we think further.

Creating your thesis is precisely that: a creative effort. Your thesis adds to the academic conversation: it's yours and yours alone. Your thesis gives your essay its individuality and interest.

4.2.1 Formulating a working thesis statement

So how do we go about formulating a thesis statement?

A thesis statement should:

- express one idea in a single sentence;
- answer the essay question directly; and
- make a claim that you could imagine a reader disputing.

Let's look at each of these elements and some of the traps that we can immediately avoid.

A single idea

Your essay needs to have a single focus. Your thesis is the main position you're taking. It can be all too easy to find yourself hovering between two positions – especially if the essay question tempts you to evaluate two opposing ideas.

Suppose you're answering this question.

Is Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* comic or tragic?

In the play, an old man listens to tape recordings of his earlier self and ponders the distance between the man he was and the lonely figure he has become. Having studied the play, we might decide that:

Beckett's play contains elements of both comedy and tragedy.

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(Maybe we've been told to produce a 'balanced' argument, and this is our attempt to do so.) The danger of a double focus is clear. Notice, also, that the answer doesn't answer the question: that tiny word 'or' demands that we *choose* between comedy and tragedy.

We need to refine our thesis.

Through examining the material of the play, the effect of its performance on the audience, and possibly some definition of the terms 'comedy' and 'tragedy', we need to reach a single position on the question.

Maybe we arrive at a thesis such as:

> *Although containing many elements of traditional popular comedy, Beckett's play 'Krapp's Last Tape' ultimately functions as a tragedy.*

The 'although' section is a concession clause: it concedes or admits the strength of an argument opposite to your own. By showing that you have considered the counterargument to your own, you show your reader that your own view is not mere subjective opinion.

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Answering the question

The thesis statement *must* answer the question. Too often, students simply echo the question in the thesis statement.

For example, suppose you're answering this question.

> **To what extent does Michael Porter's Five Forces of Competitive Position model provide an adequate perspective for assessing the competitive strength and position of a commercial enterprise?**

A student falling into the trap of echoing the question would produce a thesis statement such as:

> *Michael Porter's Model of Competitive Position outlines five forces that, in his view, drive competition between businesses.*

This statement doesn't answer the question; it merely outlines the scope of the essay. (Five forces, rather than four or six; the forces defined by Michael Porter, not anyone else.)

A common variation of the 'echoing' thesis is the 'scaffolding' thesis, in which the writer offers a statement of intent rather than a thesis:

> *In this essay, I shall consider the five forces identified by Porter and assess how effective they are in assessing the competitive strength of commercial businesses.*

'Scaffolding' is very common in student essays. It has its place – but not in your thesis statement. That statement should say what you want to *say* in your essay; not what you want to *write about*.

Consider the directive words 'to what extent'. Your thesis statement would need to make a claim that directly answers those words. At its most basic, your answer might be 'wholly', 'partly' or 'not at all'. The position you choose will depend on your study and the judgements you have made in the course of your research.

Making a disputable claim

Does your thesis statement pass the 'so what?' test?

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Imagine speaking your thesis statement to your reader (or to your tutor in a seminar!). If you can imagine your reader shrugging their shoulders and saying 'So what?', then your thesis probably does little more than summarize some facts, or state a popular opinion.

Thesis statements trigger the 'so what?' response when they're too vague or generalized. If the statement contains words like 'good', 'impressive' or 'successful', try to be more specific. What makes something good, or impressive, or successful?

Imagine that you are answering this question.

Discuss the use of imagery in Picasso's *Guernica.*

A thesis statement like this is guaranteed to provoke a 'so what?' response (if not a slightly less polite 'duh'):

Picasso's painting 'Guernica' is one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century art.

How *could* we make a disputable claim in answer to this question?

By stating a thesis that our reader could *disagree* with.

That word 'discuss' in the question, as we've seen, could mean all sorts of things. The question gives us two other clues. One clue is about the scope of the question: we're asked to consider *imagery* in the picture, rather than colour, structure or technique. Another clue is in that tiny word 'use'. We're being asked, not just about what the imagery *is*, but how Picasso *uses* it.

Think about the six patterns of explanation: what might they suggest?

Examples	List all the images you can see in the picture.
Categorization	Group the images into categories: human, animal, mechanical…
Definition	What do we mean by the word 'image'? Does the depiction of an animal or a light bulb automatically signal something other than itself?
Comparison/contrast	Are some images placed in contrast to others? Do some images seem to fulfil similar functions? Are some images placed in similar or contrasting places within the scheme of the painting?
Process analysis	Do we know anything about the sequence in which Picasso developed his imagery in this painting?
Cause and effect	Are any of the images derived from other paintings or visual traditions? Do we know anything about *why* Picasso painted the picture?

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What kind of argument might emerge from this analysis? We might find ourselves with a thesis statement like this:

> *In 'Guernica', Picasso uses conventional imagery to illustrate the horror and injustice of fascist militarism.*

We can imagine our reader responding with: "Oh, really? Convince me!"

Your task would now be to show, using evidence from the painting and other works of art, that your claim is reasonable.

You're answering the question; and you're making a single point. This is a good working thesis.

4.2.2 Gathering information

Once you have a working thesis, you can begin to gather together the material that you could use to develop it into an essay. You're starting to research.

Research is *searching*: you are looking for something, not merely reading around a subject. What are you looking for? An answer to your question; and information that will support your answer, by offering ideas or evidence. But of course, what you discover in your research may alter your view of the question, and your answer to it.

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Research helps you to refine your thesis statement.

There's a kind of pattern of work here.

- Research and take notes with the working thesis in mind.
- Compare notes and information with your working thesis.
- Refine your thesis.
- Research and take notes with the refined thesis in mind…

And so on. This is a circular or *iterative* process.

Searching and discovering new information

Where can you search? The obvious places, of course, are books. Which means that, if you want to look further than the reading list you've been given for your course, you should head for the college library and talk to a librarian. (Librarians like nothing better than being asked to look things up.) But you can find information and ideas in other places too:

- book reviews;
- chapters in edited books;
- articles in journals; and
- compilations of reading materials offered by your tutor or department

Oh, yes. And the internet.

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We all use Wikipedia and Google to find information. Indeed, according to a 2010 report published in *First Monday,* an online journal, "more than half of college students use Wikipedia for course-related research." Most students in the survey were using Wikipedia at the beginning of their research, to find background information or a topic summary.

Surfing the web is great for fast background reading and gaining a general sense of the academic landscape you're exploring; but you'll need to dig deeper to find sources that are reliable and authoritative. After all, when you search online, you'll find (among other things):

- articles in newspapers and magazines by journalists who aren't always experts;
- websites promoting products, services, campaigns, ideologies, faith systems and plain whacky ideas (and not carefully considered research);
- student essays; and
- acceptable scholarly resources (often behind passwords or subscription paywalls, which your college may have paid for).

Of course, any of these sources might offer you something worth using. But you need to decide *how* to use that material, and what credibility to give it. Indeed, learning how to distinguish credible material from suspicious material is a key study skill.

And remember that, if you're using Wikipedia, then everyone else probably is doing so. At best, your material will be unoriginal; at worst, you could be laying yourself open to charges of plagiarism. (Plagiarism is a huge problem. You need to know about it and do everything you can to avoid it. Read more about plagiarism in Chapter 6.)

One online resource that the academic community usually finds acceptable is Google Scholar. This is a great source of academic publications, especially journal articles. If you're at college, you probably belong to a scheme that gives you access to these articles, instantly expanding your field of research.

Information overload is a very real risk. Keep returning to the question you're answering: how do these articles contribute useful ideas or evidence to help you build your argument?

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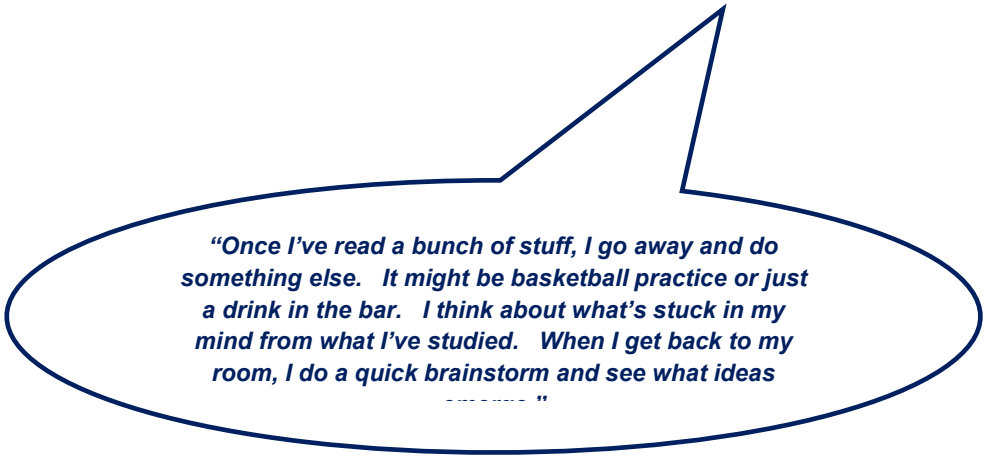
Comparing information with your thesis

At some point – at several points in this journey – you can stop and compare what you've learnt with your working thesis. How does this material contribute to your argument? How does it *change* your argument? One student explained this moment to me like this.



Brainstorming is the process of gathering ideas, in no particular order, looking for new connections. You're looking for ideas that will contribute to your argument. In a sense, you're arguing with yourself. The important rule about brainstorming is: don't rule anything out.

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If you're stuck, try out these questions to stimulate new mental connectivity.

- What do you already know?
- What would you like to know?
- What's the most interesting thing you've learnt?
- What are the new questions you need to ask?

Remind yourself of the topic you're working with. What is the essence of your argument? Does it still hold? What patterns of explanation are you using? How can the material contribute to those patterns?

Try the famous 'six working men' (the name comes from a poem by Rudyard Kipling):

who, what, where, when, how, why

Suppose you're working on an essay about women's education in a particular country. You might ask:

- *Why is education especially important for women in this country?*
- *Who offers education to women in this country?*
- *What are the consequences of improved education for women in this country?*
- *When did women's education become a decisive political issue there?*
- *Where is the issue of women's education most urgent in this country's society?*
- *How is women's education being promoted and developed there?*

And so on.

If you do both of these things – researching information, and brainstorming your ideas – the rest periods can become as productive as study time. You'll start to look out for those moments when ideas come to you unbidden.

Recording your ideas: note-taking

Record all your notes and ideas, however untidily. Of course, if you *can* make notes systematically and tidily, they'll be all the more useful.

At the very least, keep all your notes in one place. You could use a notepad or sketchblock: jot down your ideas whenever you think of them. Many students use record cards. You can, of course, also create electronic notes on your computer; but if you do so, you *must* back everything up, preferably on an external hard drive, so that you reduce the risk of losing all that hard work. (You could also use a file-sharing service like Dropbox or SugarSync.)

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Keep a record of everything!

One of the main time-wasters in essay writing is the search for material that you vaguely remember reading, somewhere, several weeks ago. Another is the tedious task of listing all your sources in the essay itself. You can reduce your frustration and sense of terminal despair by listing all your sources as you study them. The more well organized your study notes, the less time you'll waste.

Note-taking has three principal uses.

- It helps you remember the material you study.
- It helps you make sense of what you're studying.
- It helps you generate new arguments and find evidence to support them.

The best method of note-taking, therefore, would be the method that helps you in these three ways. Good note-taking should help you *recall information*, *understand its meaning* and *generate new ideas*.

Students take notes in many different ways. You'll need to experiment to find the methods that work for you. What's certain is that the best methods are those in which the student *rewrites* the material: summarizing, rewording and reorganizing it.

Research suggests that the most common method – highlighting material in a book as you read it – is more or less useless. It doesn't help you recall information, it doesn't help you understand what it means, and it offers almost no help in generating new ideas.

The next most common method – simply re-reading the material – is also of very limited use.

So how should we take notes?

Cornell notes

Take a look at one of the chapter summaries in this book. They're presented as Cornell notes, a note-taking system that's one of the very best.

Here's how they work.

1. In your notebook, give each page a heading space and divide the rest of the page into three sections. Draw a thick, horizontal line about five or six lines from the bottom, and a thick, vertical line about two inches in from the left. Use felt-tip pen or marker pen to make the lines clear. You can use different colours if you wish, to make the page look more interesting.
2. Write the source of the material at the top of the page: details of the lecture, book, article, webpage or other source. Use a formal citation style. (More on citation shortly.)

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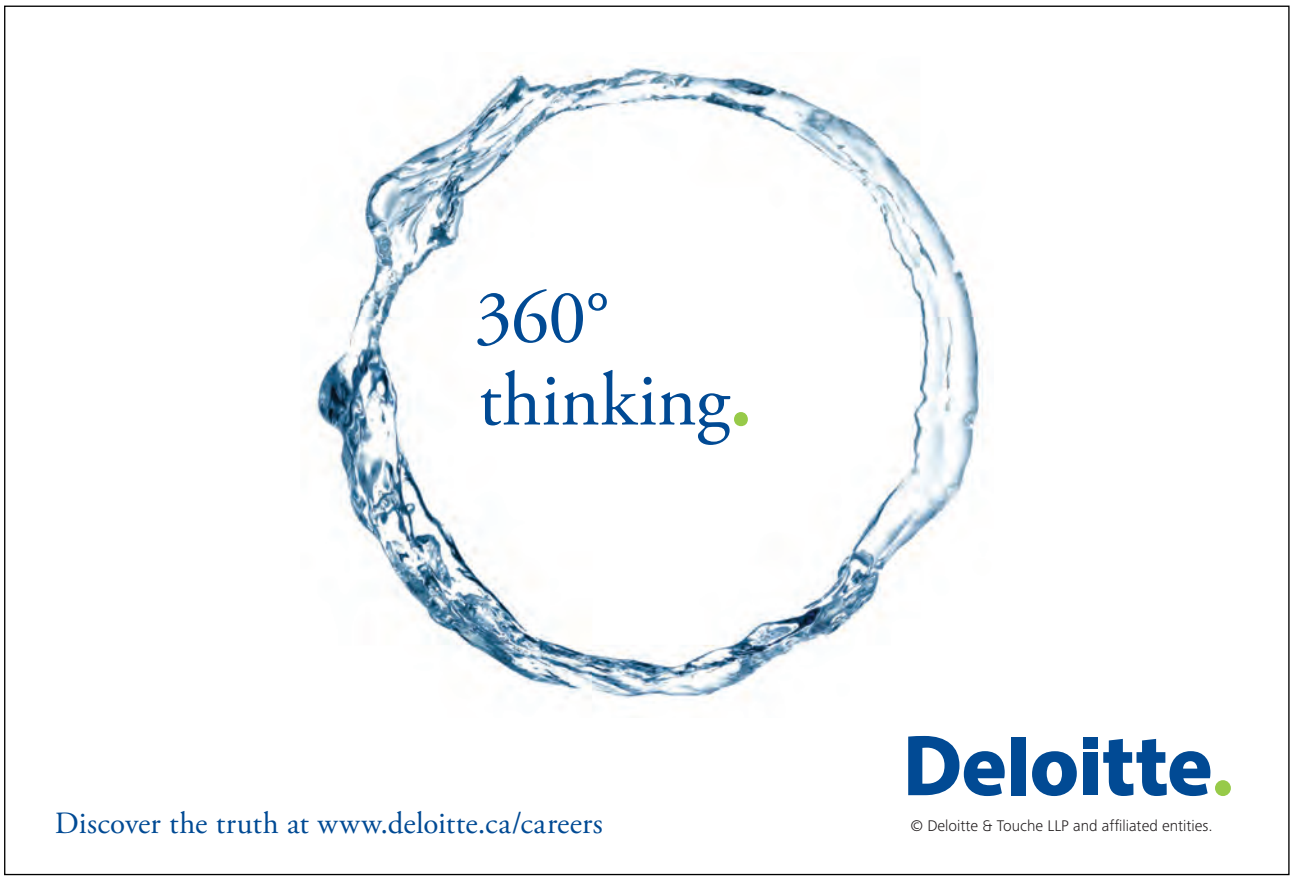
3. Write your detailed notes in the large box on the right. Skip a line between sections of material or ideas. Write in shorthand: use abbreviations and symbols that you can easily remember (such as '&' for 'and'; '>' for 'leads to'; and so on).
4. In the left-hand column, write main ideas, key points, names, dates and so on.
5. In the bottom section of the page, write a summary of the material in your own words.

Revise the notes regularly. Here's how.

1. As soon as possible after you make the notes, review the notes in the right-hand column and ask yourself *questions* based on those notes. Write the questions down in the left-hand column. These questions help you, not only to recall the information, but also to make sense of it and generate ideas of your own.
2. Now cover the right-hand column and, in your own words, aloud, answer your own questions. Use the other material in the left-hand column as cues to help you.
3. Extend the questions that you ask yourself. Ask: "Why are these facts important? Are they based on any broader principles? How can I use them? How do they fit with what I've already learned? What should I now look at?"
4. Repeat this routine, once a week, for ten minutes on each page.



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Cornell notes bring a number of benefits, not just as a study tool but also as an essay-writing tool.

- They help you to organize your notes consistently. The system is efficient: you don't need to copy your notes several times; you can add material to pre-existing notes; and you don't need to 'reinvent the wheel' every time you start taking new notes.
- The left-hand column helps you to make sense of the material, especially as part of active revision.
- The summary box helps you to refashion material in your own words. Cornell notes actually help you to formulate the argument that your tutor is looking for in your essay.
- Cornell notes are extremely easy to use. You can take notes in the usual way and extend your skill using the page design. You can also use your own styles of note-taking as part of the Cornell system.

Creating an annotated bibliography

If you're really serious about research, the most academic kind of record is an annotated bibliography. This is a list of all the sources you plan to use in your essay. Each source is cited formally, in the style your college or faculty uses (you'll find more on citing sources in Chapter 6.) For each source, write a summary of the material and its relevance to your essay.

Annotated bibliographies help you:

- keep track of all your sources;
- read your sources intelligently; and
- find ways to relate the source material to your thesis.

Before you begin, gather all the material you intend to use, make some general notes from it (maybe using Cornell notes), and decide which citation method you're going to use.

Create an entry for each source. Cite it correctly; list sources in alphabetical order of the author's last name (and alphabetically if there is more than one author); and write three to five sentences summarizing the material.

Summarize consistently. This structure works well.

- A sentence on the topic or research question addressed by the source.
- A sentence defining that thesis of the material.
- A sentence on the author's approach and methodology: where they have found *their* sources, what kind of research they have done, how the material is organized

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- A sentence on the relevance of this material to your own essay or thesis
  - What ideas can you use to *support* your thesis?
  - What does the author *not* say or include?
  - What does the author say that you will *disagree* with?

You could organize your annotated bibliography on cards, or on files on your computer. (Back up!)

Sample annotated bibliography (with explanatory comments)

Bartlett, Miriam. "Blamen in the Ninth Invasion of Terraphor." Journal of Galactic History 657.4 (4013): pp. 399–538.

In this article, Bartlett discusses the controversial question of whether, and to what extent, Blamen took up arms during the Ninth Invasion of Terraphor [Identifies the scope of the article]. *After assessing three historians' accounts of the invasion, Bartlett examines the different perspectives on Blamen's involvement in the invasion given in Fedorian and Terraphorian records* [Explains the sources used]. *Bartlett reveals the inherent ideological biases in both sets of records. She concludes that Blamen took part only in the later parts of the invasion, when hostilities had more or less ceased, but that their participation at this stage of the invasion was considerable* [Explains the article's thesis]. *This article offers a comprehensive summary of the sources, both primary and secondary; it will help support my thesis that Blamen were able to contribute to military and political change during the invasion in only limited ways, due to their secondary status as citizens in both planetary empires* [Explains how the article will be relevant to your essay].

You must record all the sources, so that you can find them again, and so that you can cite those sources in the essay.

You'll have seen some examples of citations already, in this chapter. Your department, college or university will almost certainly have its own guidelines for citation styles: in other words, how they want you to refer to sources of material. If in doubt, ask.

One of the most common citation styles is the MLA style (named after the Modern Language Association). If you're referring to a book, for example, using this style, your reference should include:

- the name of the author(s) or editor(s);
- the complete title;
- the edition, if indicated;
- the place of publication;
- the shortened name of the publisher;
- the date of publication; and
- the medium of publication.

The basic format of a reference, then, will look like this:

Lastname, First name. *Title of Book*. Place of Publication: Publisher, Year of Publication. Medium of Publication.

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Here's a typical example:

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Putnam, 1955. Print.

If you are referring to a particular passage in the book, then you should add the page number or numbers.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Putnam, 1955. Print. pp. 45–47.

These guidelines apply only to your notes. When you come to produce the essay itself, you'll need to adapt the style slightly, both for citations within the text of the essay and for the list of citations at the end.

If this sounds complicated – well, it is, somewhat. But it's all part of the academic method, so we all need to understand how to cite – and why it's important to do so properly. Of course, the system gets even more complicated as it deals with books with multiple authors, articles in books, articles in journals or magazines, and material in other media: newspapers, videos, web pages and so on.

Check out the resources at your college or university to make sure that you are citing properly. There are also plenty of resources online to help you. I've listed a few at the back of this book.

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ŠKODA

Do you like cars? Would you like to be a part of a successful brand?
We will appreciate and reward both your enthusiasm and talent.
Send us your CV. You will be surprised where it can take you.
Send us your CV on
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The most important point here is that you *must* record every source of material, both in your notes and in your essay. Without that record, you and others will not be able to find the material you're using. And if you fail to record sources as you go, you'll waste an *enormous* amount of time later, recovering all those lost citations.

4.2.3 Refining your thesis statement

As you develop your ideas, gather information, make notes and think further, your principal aim is to refine your thesis statement.

How will your refined thesis statement differ from your working thesis statement?

For a start, the refined thesis will almost certainly be longer than your working thesis. It will contain:

- the **subject** of the essay;
- a **precise claim** about that subject; and
- a **ground plan**, indicating the structure of the supporting material in the essay.

More than that, it will be more precise, persuasive and predictive.

Refined thesis statement: checklist

Precise

Your refined thesis should:

- express a single idea;
- focus narrowly on the scope of the question; and
- use unambiguous language, containing no metaphors, similes or figures of speech.

Persuasive

Your refined thesis should present a claim that is:

- disputable (you could argue against it);
- supportable (you have arguments and evidence to support it); and
- original (at least, you are not simply copying a claim made by someone you have read or heard in a lecture).

Predictive

The thesis statement should contain a ground plan, indicating the essay's structure.

How original is 'original'?

Students often worry about how original their thesis statements are. Your tutor or examiner will not mark you well for simply repeating ideas that you've read or heard. They want to see evidence that you've thought about this material and developed some ideas of your own. But you shouldn't be too concerned about originality; in truth, if you go through the process we've been exploring in this chapter, your thesis *will* be original.

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At undergraduate level, your tutor or examiner is looking, above all, for evidence that you have understood the material you have studied and that you can develop a coherent argument. In researching the material, comparing it to your working thesis and organizing your thoughts, you are shaking up the material and creating your own pattern of argument. That pattern will be unique to you. It may not be wildly innovative, but it will almost certainly be new. And that's what your marker will be looking for.

Creating a ground plan: three examples

A ground plan indicates the structure of your essay. It lays out the *grounds* of your argument: the points that support your thesis statement. In your thesis statement, those points should appear in the same order in which you will present them in the body of your essay.

Let's look at three examples of refined thesis statements, all containing ground plans.

In the first, the essay is addressing this question.

> **What were the causes of the 1926 General Strike in the United Kingdom?**

And here is one student's answer.

> *The General Strike of 1926* **[subject]** *had three main causes* **[precise claim]***: the depletion of coal supplies as a result of the First World War; economic measures that harmed the UK's ability to trade and export; and rapidly worsening conditions among miners* **[ground plan]**.

The writer has listed three causes in the ground plan; we now expect the essay to cover those three causes in the order presented in this thesis statement.

Sometimes, the ground plan extends your thesis statement so much that it's better to break the statement into several sentences, and create a paragraph. Here's a second example that does that: one based on a question we looked at earlier.

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To what extent does Michael Porter's Five Forces of Competitive Position model provide an adequate perspective for assessing the competitive strength and position of a commercial enterprise?

And here is one student's answering refined thesis statement.

> *Michael Porter's Five Forces of Competitive Position model* **[subject]** *provides only a limited perspective for assessing the competitive strength and position of a commercial enterprise.* **[precise claim]** *Strategy consultants occasionally use the model to begin evaluating a firm's strategic position, but only as a checklist. Porter himself recommends that the model should be used only within one line of business: diversified companies or groups may find the model less useful. Finally, academics and strategists have criticized the model for being based on a number of dubious assumptions.* **[ground plan]**

Here, the ground plan offers three reasons why the model is considered of only limited usefulness. And finally, a third refined thesis statement, in answer to this question.

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Is Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* comic or tragic?

Notice here that the ground plan offers three ways in which the play operates as a tragedy. We can expect patterns of explanation including *definition*, *comparison and contrast*, and *listing by examples*.

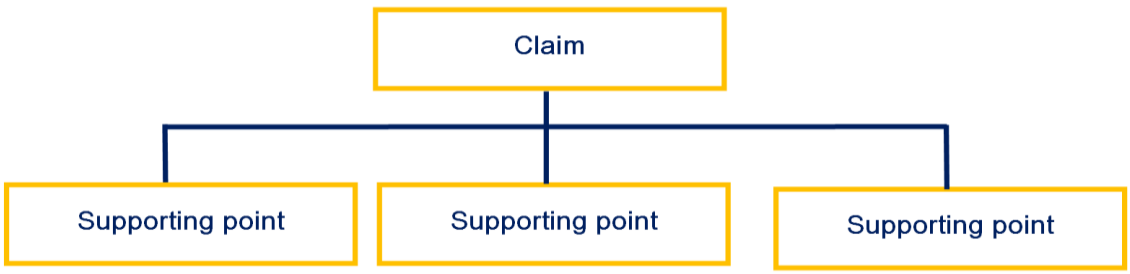
> *Although containing many elements of traditional popular comedy, Beckett's play 'Krapp's Last Tape'* **[subject]** *ultimately functions as a tragedy.* **[precise statement]** *The play's central character displays features commonly associated with tragedy: both hubris and hamartia. The structural plan of the play reinvents the tragic movement through peripeteia, in which ignorance becomes knowledge. Krapp's situation inspires both fear and pity as we witness both his hopelessness and his capacity to endure.* **[ground plan]**

Constructing your ground plan is the key to planning your essay. Once you know what points you want to make to support your claim, you can decide how to order them, and hence how to organize the material.

Creating your ground plan is essentially a *design* activity. You are assembling the results of all your planning work so far:

- analysing the question: its scope and the approach you will take in answering it;
- reviewing the material you have studied, what other scholars have said, and how your point of view differs; and
- deciding on the claim that will head up your refined thesis statement.

Now, you're seeking to transform this mass of material and ideas into a coherent structure. And that structure will be a pyramid.



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The supporting points in your pyramid will be the hooks on which you'll hang the sections of your essay. With your supporting points clearly defined, you're ready to move to the next stage of planning: creating an outline.

Creating a ground plan: three questions

How do you find the ground plan to support your claim? One way is to check the question that your claim provokes. Your claim will always provoke one (and only one) of three possible questions.

'Which ones?'

The General Strike of 1926 had three main causes. **[*Which ones?*]**

'Why?'

Michael Porter's Five Forces of Competitive Position model provides only a limited perspective for assessing the competitive strength and position of a commercial enterprise. **[*Why?*]**

'How?'

Although containing many elements of traditional popular comedy, Beckett's play 'Krapp's Last Tape' ultimately functions as a tragedy. **[*How?*]**

Once you have identified the question that your claim provokes, you can find a group of answers to that question. Those answers will provide you with the ground plan for your essay.

Supporting points: final thoughts

Before we move on, a couple of important final thoughts.

First: the supporting points that you create should all be of the same kind.

- If your claim provokes the question **'Which ones?'**, then your answers – and your supporting points – will be **examples**: 'this one, that one, and the other one'.
- If your claim provokes the question **'Why?'**, your answers will be **reasons**.
- And if your claim provokes the question **'How?'**, then your answers will be **ways in which something happens or is true.**

Secondly: you may have noticed that in all my examples I've given three supporting points. (Even my diagram contains three boxes for supporting points!)

There's no very strong reason why I have limited myself to three points. You may decide that you want to offer more supporting points; if so, I recommend that, for the average length of an undergraduate essay, you find no more than five or six at the very most. If you limit yourself to only two supporting points, you may be missing some important aspect of your subject or failing to develop your analysis fully enough.

Three is a good number to aim for. But don't be rigid about it.

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5 Constructing an outline

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Key points and questions	Details
What's the background? Why does this argument matter?	First find your FRAME OF REFERENCE: background to the argument, and why it matters. • Material about the background >> INTRODUCTION • Material about why your argument matters >> CONCLUSION
How do I arrange the pyramid of my ideas?	The basic arrangement of an outline is always a PYRAMID. It should have *four* levels: thesis statement (unnumbered); key point level (1,2,3...); the sub-point level (1.1, 1.2, 1.3...); and the minor point level (1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.1.3...)
What evidence am I going to use?	We use evidence in essays to support our ideas. Kind of evidence depends in part on the discipline you're working in.

Summary Nearly every essay you will be asked to write will have this basic structure.
INTRODUCTON
BODY
CONCLUSION
The best way to plan the essay's structure is to create an outline. An outline is a miniature version of your essay, written in numbered, single sentences.

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Nearly every essay you will be asked to write will have this basic structure.

Introduction
Body
Conclusion

Check with your tutor whether they're looking for a specific structure. My guess is that, nine times out of ten, it won't vary much from what I've shown you here.

This essay structure is *linear*. It takes your reader on a journey, from introduction to conclusion. The aim is always to lead your reader from *old* information to *new* information: from what you've just told them to something they don't yet know.

You have to develop the stages in the journey: they will be your *paragraphs*.

The best way to plan the essay's structure is to create an outline. An outline is a miniature version of your essay, written in numbered, single sentences. The sentences express the key ideas in your essay; the numbers indicate how the ideas relate to each other. Those sentences will form the heads of the paragraphs in your essay.

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An outline lets you see the big picture before you start drafting. It allows you to see how your paragraphs will be structured and how they'll link to each other. Most usefully, with an outline you can move your paragraphs around very easily, without becoming confused in lots of detail.

All outlines combine two organizing principles.

- Putting your ideas into sequences
- Organizing your ideas into pyramids

How you combine these two principles will be your choice, based on the demands of the essay that you're planning.

5.1 Creating a frame of reference

Your reader needs to be able to put your argument into context. Without understanding the context, they're likely to respond to what you've written by saying: "Well, I can see what you're saying; but what's the *point* of what you're saying? *So what?*".

We usually call this context the essay's **frame of reference**. The frame of reference tells your reader:

- the background of your argument; and
- why your argument matters.

The frame of reference might include the historical or geographical context in which the question has arisen. Are you looking at the development of sea trade during the 16th century, or over a longer period? In Europe or globally? And *why* does it matter that sea trade developed in the way it did, during the period you're discussing?

The frame of reference might also include what others have said about the issue. Contemporary writers or other academics may have taken a view on the topic; perhaps you want to show that those views are limited or inaccurate.

Referring to these other writers – especially other academics or thinkers – will be an important part of your strategy in building your argument. Your tutor will want to know that you've read around the topic, and that you've read *critically* – not simply restating what another academic has said, but engaging with it, thinking about it, and responding to it.

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By working on a frame of reference at this stage, you can also prepare the Introduction and the Conclusion to your essay.

- Material about the background to your argument will go into the Introduction.
- Material about why your argument matters will go into the Conclusion.

5.2 Supporting your thesis statement: building a pyramid

By the end of Chapter 4, we had found a small number of key points to support our thesis statement. We discovered those supporting points by imagining that the thesis statement provoked a question in the reader's mind. That question was one of three: "Why?"; "How?"; "Which ones?" The supporting points were answers to that question.

For most discursive essays, we need a small number of supporting points. You need at least two; and probably no more than about five or six.

Here's another example based on this question.

What are the most important factors affecting women's political leadership in Bethania?

(Bethania, by the way, is a fictional country.)

Here's a possible thesis statement for this essay.

> *For most women occupying positions of political power in Bethania* [**subject**], *social class has had more effect on their style of leadership than any other factor, including gender.* [**precise claim**] *Social background dictates the opportunities for women to exercise leadership, the nature of their political beliefs and the issues that matter to them.* [**ground plan**]

Here is that thesis statement in diagram form.

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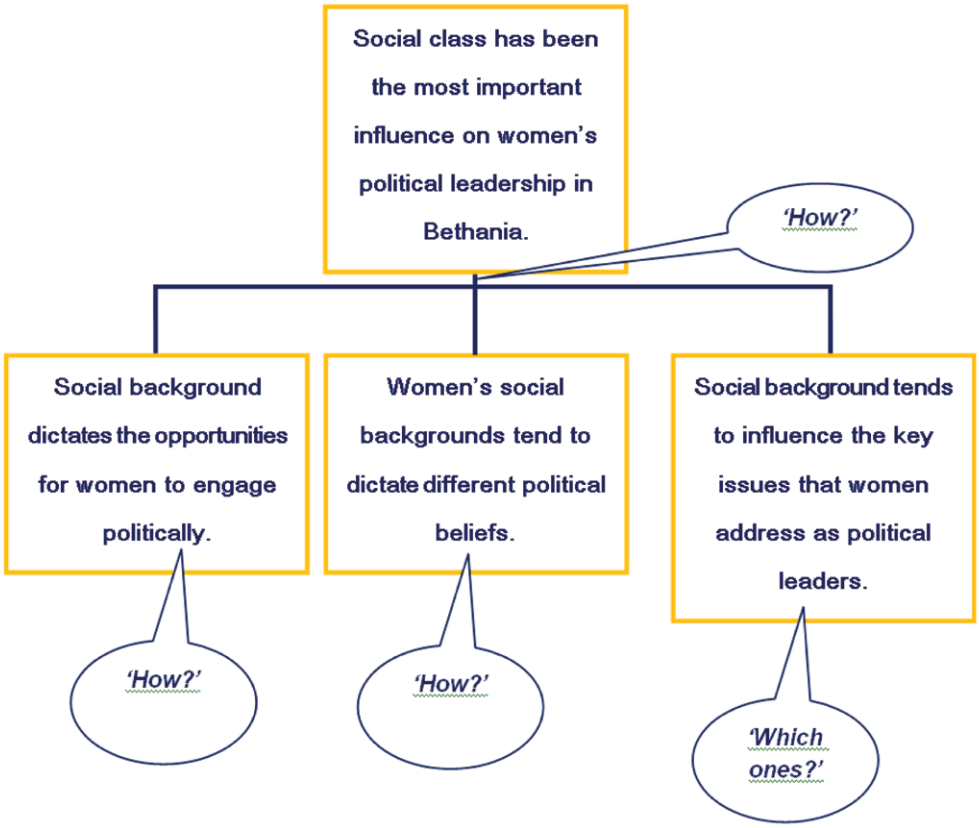

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The ground plan has generated three **key points**. Notice how each key point itself generates a new question.

Let's now rearrange these points into outline format.

Thesis statement

Social class has been the most important influence on women's political leadership in Bethania.

Key points

1. ***Social background dictates the opportunities for women to engage politically.***
2. ***Women's social backgrounds tend to dictate different political beliefs.***
3. ***Social background tends to influence the key issues that women address as political leaders.***

How do we decide on the order of these three points? It's a sort of cause-and-effect pattern: the opportunities to engage politically determine the women's beliefs, which themselves determine the issues around which they choose to campaign.

Now we can extend the outline by creating **sub-points** to support the key points. And we do so in exactly the same way: answering the question provoked by the key point and finding a small number of answers (at least two; no more than about five or six). All the sub-points must be answers to the question provoked by the key point. And all of them must be single-point sentences.

Social class has been the most important influence on women's political leadership in Uruguay.

1. ***Social background dictates the opportunities for women to engage politically.***
   - ***1.1. Working-class women are forced into political leadership through necessity.***
   - ***1.2. Middle-class women choose leadership roles.***
2. ***Women's social backgrounds tend to dictate different political beliefs.***
   - ***2.1. Working-class women tend to become anarchists or loyal supporters of the dictatorship.***
   - ***2.2. Middle-class women tend to become democratic socialists.***
3. ***Social background tends to influence the key issues that women address as political leaders.***
   - ***3.1 Working-class women tend to campaign for issues directly affecting daily life.***
   - ***3.2 Middle-class women tend to campaign on broader, more strategic issues, still overwhelmingly related to the position of women in society.***

There's another pattern of explanation at work here, of course. We're comparing and contrasting two social groups. Notice how, in the outline, we set out that pattern consistently: in each paragraph, we discuss working-class women first, and then middle-class women. This *parallel construction* helps to strengthen the argument.

We can complete this section of the outline by adding detailed information to support each sub-point. We might add more detailed ideas, or evidence supplied by our research. Call these **minor points**.

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It's a good idea not to add any further levels to the pyramid. It should have *four* levels: the thesis statement level (unnumbered); the key point level (1, 2, 3…); the sub-point level (1.1, 1.2, 1.3…); and the minor point level (1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.1.3…)

(The decimal numbering system is, in my view, by far the best way to number the points, because it helps you see at a glance what level you are working on.)

Finally, we can add a very brief version of both the **introduction** and **conclusion**. Go back to your notes on the frame of reference, and write a very brief paragraph for each.

- The introduction offers a brief statement of the background to your argument. It *ends* with your thesis statement.
- The conclusion puts your argument into a broader context and points the way forward. It answers the 'so what?' question that your reader might ask having read your essay.

We'll develop the introduction and conclusion in more detail in the next chapter.

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Introduction

Women are severely under-represented in Bethania's political system. The situation is changing, partly under pressure from developments in other countries. But the choices facing women are still limited. Although many sociologists claim that gender is a primary determinant of leadership style, recent political history has shown that social class has, overwhelmingly, been the most important influence on women's political leadership in Bethania.

1 Social background dictates the opportunities for women to engage politically.
1.1 Working-class women are forced into political leadership through necessity.
1.1.1 They are marginalized economically, limiting their opportunities.
1.1.2 They lack access to education, limiting their choices.
1.2 Middle-class women choose leadership roles.
1.2.1 They have access to education, greatly increasing their range of choice.
1.2.2 They have wider social experience, giving them more opportunities and awareness.

2 Women's social backgrounds tend to dictate different political beliefs.
2.1 Working-class women tend to become anarchists or loyal supporters of the dictatorship.
2.1.1 Their political choices are a direct result of their oppression by the regime.
2.1.2 Their political choices are dictated by the extreme urgency of their need.
2.2 Middle-class women tend to become democratic socialists.
2.2.1 Democratic socialist parties offer an inheritance of political mobilization in favour of women's rights.
2.2.2 Democratic socialism promises more strategic improvements in the situation of women than other political paths.

3 Social background tends to influence the key issues that women address as political leaders.
3.1 Working-class women tend to campaign for issues directly affecting daily life.
3.1.1 Most campaigns led by working-class women focus on pay and working conditions.
3.1.2 The next most frequent campaigns are health-related.
3.2 Middle-class women tend to campaign on broader, more strategic issues, still related to the position of women in society.
3.2.1 They usually instigate or support programmes to alleviate poverty.
3.2.2 They often campaign for universal free education.

Conclusion

As Bethania enters a new era of more democratic politics, women will enjoy more opportunities to engage in the political process, and particularly to collaborate on issues of common interest. It is important, therefore, for women themselves to understand the social background that determines their different political paths as leaders, if only to help them transcend their differences and make a more powerful contribution to Bethania's future.

5.2.1 Finding the best arrangement of ideas

The basic arrangement of an outline is always a pyramid. But you can introduce some variety into this arrangement.

- You might sequence the key points in a **chronological arrangement**: 1 coming before 2, and so on.
- You might choose a **ranking arrangement**: 1 larger/costlier/faster/more important than 2, and so on. Some writers advocate a kind of climactic arrangement: putting our strongest point first and working up to it.

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- A variation on this would be a **pros and cons arrangement**, made up of ideas in favour of our argument, objections met and answered, and a rousing conclusion.
- A **problem-solution arrangement** presents a problem first, followed perhaps by options, finishing with the preferred solution. Such an arrangement of ideas can work well as a 'softer' version of an experimental paper, and is often useful for proposals in management or business contexts.

Whatever arrangement of ideas you choose, you should be able to justify it.

5.2.2 Using evidence

We use evidence in essays to support our ideas.

Evidence *never* speaks for itself. Evidence, by definition, can only be *for* an idea (or, of course, *against* it.) Karl Popper, the great scientist, explained in his 1970 essay *On the Theory of the Objective Mind* that what counts as evidence is always driven by ideas. "You can neither collect observations nor documentary evidence," he wrote, "if you do not first have a problem".

The great danger is that you will want to include all the information that you've studied. After all, you've done all that hard work; made all those notes; surely your tutor needs to see – well, *evidence* of your study?

When you use evidence in your essay, you *must* say how it supports your argument and *why* you're using it.

You must select. Once more, the Six W Questions can help us.

- **Why** is this evidence interesting?
- **Why** do I want to use this evidence? Why is it interesting or important? Why should the reader care about it?
- **Who** is the sources of this evidence? Are they credible, authoritative and legitimate?
- **What** point does this evidence prove or support? Does it prove the point, or only *suggest* it?
- **When** was the evidence collected or created? How recent is it? Is it out of date? Is there anything more recent that might be more useful?
- **Where** did I find this evidence? Can I cite a source?
- **How** shall I use this evidence? How has the evidence been generated? How does this evidence relate to other evidence that I'm using? Is it comparable?
- **How** can I present this evidence? Can I use quotations, graphics, maps, diagrams or pictures? Can I give examples of statistical evidence to make its meaning clearer?

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With these thoughts in mind, trawl back through your study materials. Look at your notes: lecture notes, reading notes, record cards, notebooks – anything and everything. Pick out the material that looks useful. You're *not* trying to include everything you've studied. You *are* looking for credible, authoritative evidence for the ideas that you're discussing. You're looking for evidence to support your argument.

What counts as evidence? Well, that depends in part on the discipline you're working in. And it depends on the nature of your argument. Are you pursuing a truth claim, a deliberative claim, or an evaluative claim? (Check back to section 2.1.3!) What kind of evidence will most persuade your reader? A chemistry essay might include charts, graphs, or statistics as evidence. An English essay will probably include passages from texts you're discussing, examples of recurring images, or quotations from critics and other thinkers. And so on.

Make a copy of your outline and insert references to evidence in the appropriate places. Be sure that you have all the information you need to be able to cite the evidence correctly.

Creating an outline: final tips

Organize your ideas purposefully.

- What needs to come first?
- Why are you putting your ideas into this particular order?

Lead your reader from old information to new information.

- Does each paragraph introduce a new idea?
- When you create groups of sub-ideas, are they all new ideas that you have not introduced before? Are you repeating yourself anywhere?
- Are you introducing new ideas without having prepared the reader for them?

Limit the numbers of ideas in each group: at least two; no more than six. Three is always a good option.

As you go down levels in the outline, ideas should be more specific. Ideas that are equally specific should be on the same level.

Be ready to alter the outline, even while you're drafting. You are designing a structure; the best design will be the design that works.

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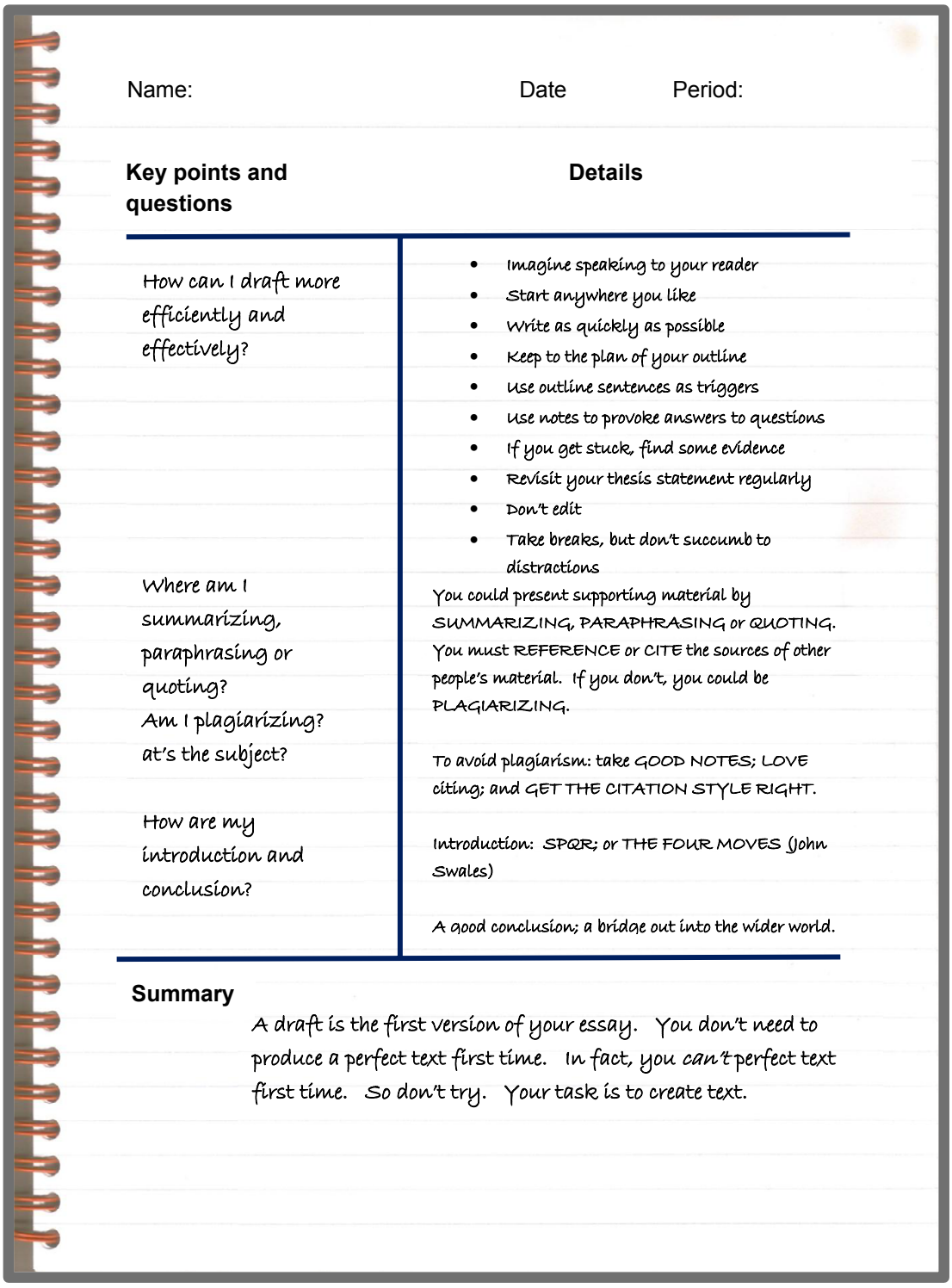
6 Drafting



Name: Date Period:

Key points and questions	Details
How can I draft more efficiently and effectively?	• Imagine speaking to your reader • Start anywhere you like • Write as quickly as possible • Keep to the plan of your outline • Use outline sentences as triggers • Use notes to provoke answers to questions • If you get stuck, find some evidence • Revisit your thesis statement regularly • Don't edit • Take breaks, but don't succumb to distractions
Where am I summarizing, paraphrasing or quoting? Am I plagiarizing? at's the subject?	You could present supporting material by SUMMARIZING, PARAPHRASING or QUOTING. You must REFERENCE or CITE the sources of other people's material. If you don't, you could be PLAGIARIZING. To avoid plagiarism: take GOOD NOTES; LOVE citing; and GET THE CITATION STYLE RIGHT.
How are my introduction and conclusion?	Introduction: SPQR; or THE FOUR MOVES (John Swales) A good conclusion; a bridge out into the wider world.

Summary

A draft is the first version of your essay. You don't need to produce a perfect text first time. In fact, you *can't* perfect text first time. So don't try. Your task is to create text.

At last! You're ready to write!

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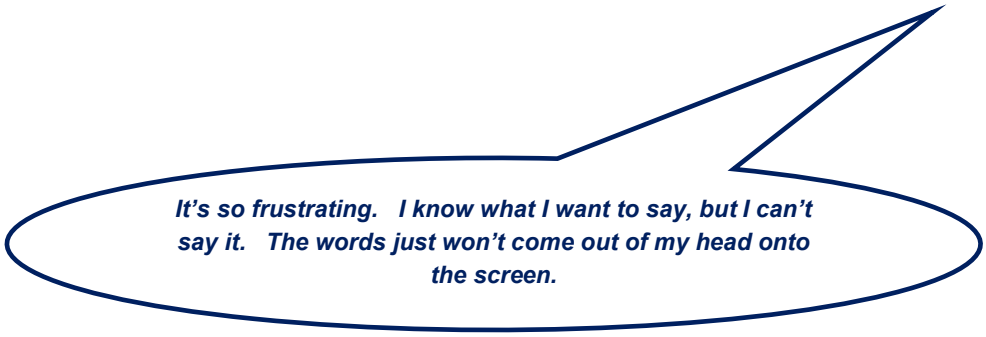
You've studied the material. You've made notes. You've analysed the question, formulated a thesis statement and developed an outline. You're in a very good position to start drafting.

But before you start, let's clarify what that word 'drafting' means.

A draft is the first version of your essay. You don't need to produce a perfect text first time. In fact, you *can't* perfect text first time. So don't try. Your task is to create text.

Students often say to me that writing doesn't come easily to them. A typical comment is:



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This feeling is extremely common. It might arise for all sorts of reasons. The most important thing is to break out of it. Try some of these tips and techniques, and see which ones work for you.

6.1 From head to page: ten tips for drafting more easily

1. **Imagine speaking to your reader and write down what you'd say to them.** This is the most valuable advice I can offer you. If you imagine speaking, you'll probably find something to say. (You may find yourself saying too much, but that's good! It gives you lots of text to edit.) If you speaking directly to your reader, you'll also begin to find the appropriate way to speak to them: language that they would understand and appreciate. Writing as you speak also helps you use correct grammar and punctuation: most of us speak grammatically most of the time, at least in our native language. And punctuating to reflect the way we speak is a good way to start punctuating, though we shall need to edit the punctuation later.

   An extra piece of advice here: read your draft out loud, either to yourself or – better still – to a friend. *Hearing* what you've written will help you see when you're writing effectively, and when the writing needs to change.

2. **Start anywhere you like.** You don't need to start with the introduction. Pick any paragraph and get going. It can be creative and enjoyable to fit sections of the essay together later; find the connecting words and phrases that will glue your text into a coherent whole.

3. **Write as quickly as possible.** If that means typing the draft directly into the computer, do that. If it means writing in longhand first, that's fine: copying the manuscript into a typescript can be a good opportunity to edit. But keep drafting and editing separate.

   If you find yourself lost for words at some point, mark the gap with square brackets (like this: *[…]*) and keep going. You can come back and fill in the gaps later.

4. **Keep to the plan of your outline.** After all, you've worked hard on it! If you feel yourself wandering, stop and move on to the next point in your outline.

   At some point, you may want to adjust the outline, in the light of what you've written. That's ok. But altering the outline means altering the plan of the essay, so you must move back into planning mode. The outline must still work when you've adjusted it.

5. **Use the sentences in your outline as triggers.** This is one of the reasons for writing the outline in sentences. Those sentences can act as 'hooks' for the rest of the text. Try writing a paragraph explaining, expanding on or supporting one of those outline sentences.

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6. **Use the questions in your notes to provoke answers.** Hold a kind of conversation with yourself. It will help you find something to say.

7. **If you get stuck, find some evidence.** Look at a source, find an example, or illustrate what you're saying with a story or quotation. Be ready to cite it and be sure that you don't simply copy text into your essay from somewhere else. (See the notes on plagiarism later in this chapter.)

8. **Revisit your thesis statement regularly.** That thesis statement sets the benchmark against which you're judging the essay. Nobody has imposed that thesis statement on you; it's yours, so you can change it.

   You might find yourself changing your position without quite realizing it. You lose track of what you were going to say, or some new idea occurs to you and distracts you from your main argument. Before you know it, the text of the essay no longer supports the thesis statement. You may need to delete material from the text; but you may also need to alter or adjust the thesis statement. If you do revise the thesis statement, you may need to revise the structure of ideas in your outline to support it. It's back to the drawing board!

9. **Don't edit.** Don't worry about grammar, punctuation, spelling or choice of words. If you decide to say something in a different way, *add* that new version to the text rather than deleting the original. The result may be a lot of repetition. That's ok: we're going to edit this draft very thoroughly later.

10. **Take breaks, but don't succumb to distractions.** It can be hard to write well for long periods. On the other hand, you'll know when the words are flowing; you won't want to stop, and time will fly. It's a good idea to take regular breaks, maybe every 90 minutes or so: walk away from your desk, look into the distance to rest your eyes, get a little physical exercise. You can suddenly find exactly what you want to say during those moments of rest.

    Distractions are another matter. Don't be tempted to collapse back into procrastination! Cut yourself off from external distractions and don't invent distractions of your own.

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Not writing enough?

If you find yourself writing too little, go back to your notes. Revisit the essay title or question, and your thoughts on how you want to answer it. Look through your outline and ask whether you've missed something. Remember that your reader will want you to explain your points more fully; you may know what you're saying, but it will be new to the reader. Find ways of including:

- examples;
- concrete evidence and explanations of how the evidence supports your points; and
- connecting text showing how ideas fit together.

Writing too much?

This, in my view, is not really a problem. Keep to the plan of your outline, and do everything you can to hit your deadline. Above all, leave lots of time for editing.

But in truth, you can't really write too much at the drafting stage. The more you write, the more material you will have for editing later. And that's good!

6.2 Illustrating, citing and quoting (and avoiding plagiarism)

Your tutor will be looking for evidence in your essay that you've read and studied critically. The material in the body of your essay, therefore, should relate to the material you've been studying. Your argument should use ideas and information that you've read, heard and discussed on the course. If you've been asked to read more, or investigate further, you need to show that you've done that.

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Don't be tempted to introduce knowledge or ideas from *outside* the range of your studies. You might feel that you're being creative by introducing your own ideas; but unfortunately, you may be creating some awkward problems for yourself.

- Tutors find it difficult to judge material that they don't know (and they're often working with a marking guide that instructs them to award marks for references to what's being taught on the course.)
- Raising ideas unrelated to the material you're studying tends to provoke questions that you may not have the space to answer.
- Those ideas may also distract from the main thrust of your argument.

It's a tricky issue. Of course you're being asked to demonstrate that you can think for yourself; you're being asked to offer your own thoughts and not just restate the ideas of others. But your essay is a *response* to what you've been studying; it's a *conversation* with what others have said and written. If you work with the material you've been studying, your creativity will emerge through your response to it.

Don't slip in descriptions or assumptions that you can't support from the evidence. Your views on the material should be *relevant* to the question being asked, and *appropriate* to the evidence you're using.

You could present supporting material by:

- summarizing it;
- paraphrasing it; or
- quoting it.

Summarizing

A summary offers a snapshot of a complete text. Summarizing is especially helpful when you want to give the background to an idea or place it in context. You might also use summaries as part of a counterargument. Summaries can allow you to draw together material from a range of sources. You must explain the sources of the material that you're summarizing.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing restates a piece of text in your own words. That means more than rearranging an author's text or altering some of the words. Set the source text to one side; imagine that you're explaining this text to someone else and restate its main ideas in your own language.

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Paraphrasing can be useful when you want to:

- introduce a writer's ideas in more interesting language;
- use another writer's ideas to support your own;
- argue against a writer's ideas;
- comment on an example that another writer has used; or
- present information that's uncontroversial.

Paraphrasing allows you to put ideas into a new light by restating them in different words. It allows you to 'spin' another writer's argument so that it looks more or less attractive, depending on how you show it. Paraphrasing therefore always carries the danger of *misrepresenting* a writer's ideas. For this reason alone, you *must* cite the source material that you are paraphrasing, so that readers can go back to the original and evaluate how fairly you've represented it.

Quoting

Quotations reproduce exactly what another writer has written.

Use a quotation when it:

- says something better than you possibly could;
- is witty, memorable or distinctive;
- is famous or well known;
- states a position with which you are going to argue closely;
- uses terms that you are going to discuss;
- represents the view of an authority that you want to use to support your own thesis; or
- demonstrates a particular way of saying something or using language.

Quotations, just like any other kind of evidence, can never speak for themselves. Don't simply drop quotations into your essay to make it look more learned. In particular, beware ending a paragraph with a quotation. Have you adequately introduced it? Have you explained why this quotation matters, or how it supports your argument? In general, introduce a quotation, present it, and then discuss it.

Whenever you quote an author, you *must* show that you are quoting by using quotations marks. Everything within the quotation marks should be *exactly* what you see in the original text – including punctuation marks. On occasions, you may need to alter the quotation to fit the grammar of your own sentence. You may want to introduce some words, or omit some, or change some. If you do so, you should use square brackets to indicate the words that are your own, or three dots (it's called an ellipsis), to show that you've left some words out.

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It goes without saying, I think, that quotations must be referenced.

Cool quoting

- **Quote what's quotable.** If the text you quote is dry and uninteresting, paraphrase it rather than quoting it. Follow your paraphrase with the author's name in brackets (or the title of an article, if there appears to be no author). Don't quote very long passages of text: maybe no more than two or three sentences at most. And don't quote incessantly.
- **Use a variety of sources.** It will demonstrate the breadth of your study and your ability to integrate different points of view into your argument. Using lots of quotations from one author will make your essay sound more like them than like you. It will also give the impression either that you have read too little, or that you are in some way fixated on a favourite author. (This is a real risk. Some critics or intellectuals are very charismatic, and we can easily fall under their spell.)
- **Use marker phrases to introduce your quotations.** A marker phrase identifies the author before the quotation appears: for example, "Thompson writes", "As Bergson suggests," or "According to Koestler". Marker phrases link your voice to the voices of others. Keep your marker phrases brief and elegant. You can include the full details of the source in brackets after the quotation, or, better still, in a footnote.

You can, of course, also present material in graphic form: graphs, charts, tables, pictures or maps. Graphics can often be the best kind of evidence: they have the air of authoritative facts. But, like all facts, statistics are open to interpretation. You still need to explain to your reader what the statistics, or the graphic, are saying: what point they are supporting.

And, once again, the source of the information must be cited.

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Citing and referencing

Whenever you use other writers' ideas or words, you must show your reader where they come from. The process of showing the sources of other people's material is called *referencing* or *citing*.

We all draw on the ideas of other people: using their ideas, we create new ones. It's important that we distinguish between the ideas that we're using, and the ones that we've created. Citation is one of the means by which we make that distinction clear. (It also helps readers to find material related to their interests, of course; your essay can act as a guide to other interesting ideas beyond your own.)

It can be hard, sometimes, to tell whether you are in fact using someone else's ideas. So many ideas might seem to be common knowledge. (Jane Austen might have called these ideas 'universally acknowledged'; the writers of the American Constitution would have called them 'truths to be held self-evident'.)

One way to decide whether an idea is common knowledge is to ask yourself two questions.

- Did I know this before I started studying?
- Did I have this idea myself?

If you answer 'no' to either or both of these questions, then you need to cite the source of the idea in your essay.

When you use evidence in your essay, you *must* say how it supports your argument and *why* you're using it. As we've seen when taking notes, different universities and disciplines use different citation systems. Among the most common is the MLA style.

Check with your tutor which citation method you should be using.

If you create a bibliography, it should reflect the citations in the essay text exactly. Every author you cite should be in the list of sources at the end. And vice versa: you shouldn't include sources in your bibliography that you haven't referred to in the essay text.

Plagiarizing

You need to cite your source, even if:

- you use quotation marks for all quotations;
- you paraphrase an author's words;
- you write a sentence referring to another author's ideas; or
- you mention an author's name.

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If you fail to do any of those things, you can be accused of plagiarism.

Plagiarism is a serious matter. Look at the word's origin: in Latin, a *plagiarius* is a kidnapper, seducer, or thief of another's slave. Not a good thing to be.

The University of North Carolina defines plagiarism as:

> *the deliberate or reckless representation of another's words, thoughts, or ideas as one's own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise.*

Copying another author's words without using quotation marks or referencing your source is plagiarism. Even putting another writer's ideas or arguments into your own words without acknowledging them can count as plagiarism. So it's actually quite easy to plagiarize without meaning to.

Plagiarism is cheating.

Universities and colleges now take rigorous measures to check essays for plagiarism. If you're found to have plagiarized, your tutor may penalize you, and your college or university may take even more serious action against you, up to and including full suspension from the course or university.

That's the bad news. The good news is that plagiarism is easily avoided. All it takes is three steps.

1 Take good notes.

The best way to avoid plagiarism is to take notes well.

Get into the habit of noting all the source information for anything you study. Use the Cornell Notes system to hold a conversation with the material you've studied. Ask:

- *What* point is the author making?
- *Why* do they consider this point important?
- *How* have they argued the point?

If you find yourself using their words, note them down in quotation marks ("…"). That way, you'll know instantly when you are indeed quoting rather than paraphrasing.

2 Feel the love for citation.

Maybe you think you use too many citations – or too few. Perhaps you think that citations give the impression that you haven't done any work or that you have no ideas of your own.

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In fact, citations are among the best ways to show that you've studied the material *and* that you're engaged in a conversation with it. Citations demonstrate what you know, but they also demonstrate – if you use them properly – that you can *think*.

If you feel your essay is citation-light, check to see whether you need more evidence to support your argument. Who else has said something like what you're saying? Or the opposite? Why should your reader believe what you're telling them?

Have you paraphrased or summarized? If so, you'll need to cite the sources.

3 Get the style right.

There are many different ways to cite. Nobody can remember every convention. Citing your sources appropriately is a matter of knowing the style your tutor wants you to use, finding the appropriate style manual and copying the citation formula consistently.

- Ask your tutor or department which citation style you should use.
- Find the appropriate guidelines.
- Use the guidelines rigorously.

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6.3 Grabbing the reader's attention: the introduction

Think carefully about how you open your essay. Your tutor or examiner is reading dozens – at times, hundreds – of essays, often on exactly the same topic. How are you going to make them sit up and take notice?

To begin with, *don't* do what everyone else does.

6.3.1 Five introductions to avoid

Here are five types of introduction that tutors and examiners see frequently. These are the introductions guaranteed to make their hearts sink. Avoid them.

The 'filler' introduction

This is the kind of introduction that simply fills the space with generalized, more or less meaningless sentences. It's like clearing your throat before saying anything worthwhile.

> *Tragedy has been a common form of drama in many different societies. There have been many different kinds of tragedy. Mostly, tragedy has been a dramatic form, although some novels can also count as tragedies.*

The 'restated question' introduction

This introduction restates the question you've been set. Whoever wrote the essay question presumably knows what the question is; they don't need you to remind them.

> *Samuel Beckett's play 'Krapp's Last Tape' contains elements of both comedy and tragedy. Many commentators and critics have different opinions about whether comedy or tragedy is the most important element of the play, and few have come to any agreement. It is important to try to understand whether the play is more of a comedy or more of a tragedy.*

Clarifying the question can be a useful strategy as *part* of your introduction, as we'll see. But simply restating it and going no further is inadequate; the introduction can, and should, do more to draw the reader in to your essay.

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The 'book report' introduction

This introduction gives the details of the book (or play, or country, or historical figure, or chemical element, or equation) that you're discussing. Perhaps essay writers use this kind of introduction because it reminds them of the book reports they wrote in junior school; it feels comfortable.

> *Samuel Beckett's play 'Krapp's Last Tape' was performed first at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 28 October 1958. It starred Patrick Magee, was directed by Donald McWhinnie and ran for 38 performances.*

This introduction tells the reader what they probably already know. It doesn't lead them towards your thesis statement. In fact, it doesn't lead anywhere.

The 'tell-em' introduction

Some textbooks advise essay writers to tell the reader what you propose to do in the essay. The same textbooks will probably then tell you to do it in the middle part, and use the conclusion to say what you've done.

This is the famous 'tell'em' principle:

- tell'em what you're going to tell 'em;
- tell 'em; and then
- tell 'em you've told 'em.

As with restating the question, signalling your intentions – and the structure of the essay – is a useful strategy. After all, it's what the ground plan in your thesis statement is doing: indicating how you propose to answer the question.

But on its own, the 'tell 'em' principle is boring. And, as the opening sentence in your introduction, it's deadly.

> *In this essay, I shall attempt to show that elements of comedy outweigh elements of tragedy in Samuel Beckett's play, 'Krapp's Last Tape'.*

(*Attempt to show* is another killer element in introductions. Only *attempt*? How confident and interested does that make your reader feel? For the same reason, avoid saying: *hopefully, this essay will demonstrate…*)

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The 'dictionary definition' introduction

This introduction starts by defining a key word in the question. Thousands of students resort to this tactic. Their intentions are good: defining a key word shows that you've read the question (or at least, that you've read *that* word), and that you've read a book (even if it's only a dictionary). And an important part of your argument may be to challenge the received definition of a term.

> *The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'tragedy' as "a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character, with a fatal or disastrous conclusion: opposite to comedy."*

Anyone can look up a word in a dictionary. And a dictionary definition probably doesn't take into account the context in which you're discussing the word.

I'm not saying you shouldn't examine the definitions of terms in the question; and I'm *not* saying you shouldn't offer one or more definitions of key terms in your essay. (Different thinkers may have defined a term in different ways, for example.) I *am* saying that you shouldn't do this in your very first sentence.

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The 'dawn-of-time' introduction

This kind of introduction makes sweeping generalizations about the topic, mostly unrelated to the thesis statement. Maybe writers feel that this is a way of drawing your reader into the essay, like a long, slow zoom in at the start of a movie.

> *Since the start of recorded history, men have stood on stages before large audiences and acted out the sad stories of their times.*

In fact, this kind of introduction is as much of a cliché as the (intentional) cliché that opens *Star Wars*.

> *A long time ago, in a galaxy far away…*

Avoid it.

6.3.2 Structuring your introduction

The best way to set about writing your introduction is to create a mini-plan.

The basic plan of any introduction is a sequence, leading your reader from where they are, and what they know, to where you want them to be, and what you want to tell them. The most important thing you want to tell them, of course, is your thesis statement, so the introduction should *end* with that.

In its basic form, this introductory sequence has four stages. You can remember it using the letters *SPQR*. If you're a historian, you'll know that this is the motto of the Roman Empire. If you're not, you now know that these letters stand for *Senatus PopulusQue Romanus* ('the senate and people of Rome'). This sequence – *SPQR* – is an example of a **mnemonic**, which is a fancy word for something to help you remember information.

Structuring your introduction

SITUATION

What's the first thing you can say about your topic that your reader will know to be true? The Situation statement is unremarkable, uncontroversial, a 'truth universally acknowledged'.

PROBLEM

What has arisen within the situation to complicate it? Perhaps something has gone wrong, or a disagreement has arisen, or new developments have altered the situation in some way.

The Problem leads to a:

QUESTION

This, of course, is the question you have been asked: your essay question. Sometimes, analysing the Question helps you backtrack to the appropriate Problem. Ask: 'Why has this question arisen?'

RESPONSE

Your answer to the question is, or should be, your thesis statement.

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Here's an example of an introduction modelled on the SPQR sequence. It opens an essay answering this question.

Discuss the causes of stereotyping in the mass media. To what extent do they influence social attitudes?

[Situation] *Stereotypes are extremely common in British society. Nationality and race, class, gender and sexual orientation are all subject to limited and rigid social descriptions.* **[Problem]** *These stereotypes have historically been perpetuated in the mass media, particularly in the tabloid press and television, where situation comedy has often depended on stereotypes for its effects.* **[Question]** *Sociologists have gathered evidence for this process, and examined its causes.* **[Response: thesis statement]** *The most prominent cause of stereotyping appears to be the need for media owners to mirror the values of their target markets. Through market research, intervention in the creative process and audience evaluation, the mass media can be seen to reinforce already existing stereotypes and perpetuate them.*

A variation on the SPQR model was developed by John Swales, a British linguist who has worked at the University of Michigan since 1985. In his book, *Genre Analysis*, published in 1990, Swales identifies four moves that academics typically make in introducing their papers. This sequence has become known, unsurprisingly, as the Four Moves model.

1. First, establish the field that you're writing about, and show why this topic is interesting or important.
2. Second, review and summarize the published research literature – or at least, the research that you've studied, and the research that is most relevant to your topic.
3. Third, show that this research is *missing something.* Create a *research space* or an *interpretative space* for your own essay.
4. Finally, present your thesis statement as a useful answer to fill that research space.

Here's a simple example of a Swalesian introduction. (Thanks again to Rao, Chanock and Krishnan for inspiration.) Here's the essay question.

What can be done to reverse the loss of 'social capital' in developed societies?

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[Move 1] *As countries develop from rural, locally organized societies towards urban centralization, social capital – the networks, values and norms linking individuals within communities – is increasingly lost.* **[Move 2]** *Sociologists such as Smithfield and Grigson have documented the increasing incidence of loneliness, mental illness and family break-up that results in newly urbanized societies. (Smithfield, 2003; Grigson, 1999)* **[Move 3]** *As yet, however, little research has been done to investigate how such a loss of social capital can be curbed or reversed.* **[Move 4]** *This essay examines three examples of projects aiming to restore social communities in London, Nairobi and Adelaide. It concludes by arguing that new models of social cohesion are needed to reflect the diversity of modern urban societies.*

Expanding the research space

You can define the gap in the research in four ways.

- Show where little research has been done. Of course, you may not know about all the research that has been done on the topic, but you can still show where what you have studied is missing something.
- Build on existing research. Show how what you have studied raises new questions or concerns, which you will address in your essay.
- Make a counter-claim. Find something to disagree with in what you have studied; leap in and start arguing.

You should complete your introduction by stating your thesis statement *in full*. The introduction thus ends with your precise claim *and* a signal of the structure of your essay.

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6.3.3 Hooking the reader: writing the first sentence

Once you have a strong structure for your introduction, you can open it with a 'hook'; a sentence that will catch the reader's attention and make them want to read on.

You could start with a bald, striking statement of fact. You could give a vivid example or illustration of your thesis statement. You could quote someone who said something controversial. You could offer a puzzling or ambiguous example. You could tell a (very brief) story. You could even ask a question.

Whatever you decide to do, try to find an opening sentence that you can be sure nobody else will offer. Of course it should be relevant and true; but it should also be striking and arresting.

6.4 Ending well: writing the conclusion

Just as the introduction should capture your reader's attention and make them *want* to read on, your conclusion should make the reader feel satisfyingly that they've *arrived.* It should give your reader the sense that everything they've read makes sense, fits together, and contributes to a new thought – something they've perhaps not realized before. That new thought needn't be earth-shattering or radical; but it should be a valuable answer to the question you've been set.

The conclusion should answer the essay question explicitly. It should summarize the argument you've presented, and gather together the key points that you've used to support it.

That answer doesn't have to be a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Many questions will be framed in such a way that such a simple answer isn't possible. For example, the question might ask: *To what extent…?* It might ask: *In what ways do…differ?* And sometimes, even when the question *does* seem to invite a 'yes-or-no' answer, you might choose to answer: *Maybe.* Or: *It depends.* Or: *Only in certain circumstances.*

As long as your argument coherently supports that answer, and your conclusion states your answer clearly, you have fulfilled your brief. You've answered the question.

6.4.1 Four conclusions to avoid

Students tend to write ready-made conclusions as often as prefabricated introductions. Here are four common conclusion types to avoid.

The 'that's all folks' conclusion

This conclusion simply restates the essay's thesis. It tends to be painfully short: the reader feels that the essay, rather than concluding, has just – stopped.

> *In conclusion, 'Krapp's Last Tape' contains more elements of tragedy than of comedy.*

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This conclusion feels abrupt because the reader needs to feel that they are being taken forward, into new territory.

The 'whodunit' conclusion

This conclusion states the thesis *for the first and only time in the essay.* The wording might be similar to the 'that's all folks' conclusion; the only difference is that we haven't read it until we reach the final paragraph.

The writer might feel, not unreasonably, that they don't want to give away their big idea until the very end; that they need to keep the reader reading to the last page, as in a detective story, to find out 'who did it'. Your tutor, however, doesn't want to read a thriller (at least, not while they're reading your essay); they're expecting an argument in academic style, with the thesis stated at the start.

The 'I have a dream' conclusion

This conclusion depends on emotion to make its mark.

> *'Krapp's Last Tape', then, in its profoundly tragic view of an individual's meaningless existence, affects us deeply with the rage, pity and horror that accompany any witnessing of a life wasted, urging us to find new meaning in our lives and encompass the true joy that can emerge from living every moment of our lives to the full.*

Very heartfelt, perhaps. Deeply moving, possibly. Analytical, thoughtful and coolly rational – hardly.

The 'and another thing' conclusion

This conclusion suddenly drags in material found nowhere else in the essay. Maybe the writer feels they should include some important stuff, but they couldn't fit it into their argument.

> *As well as being profoundly tragic, 'Krapp's Last Tape' also illustrates the influence of modern recording technology on theatrical practice, and an extension of the use of domestic furniture in stage design.*

An essay that may have been well organized ends with a confusing surprise.

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6.4.2 Key elements of a conclusion

A good conclusion acts as a kind of bridge out of your essay, back into the wider world.

Your conclusion gives you the last word. It allows you to summarize your argument and tell the reader why it matters. It can point the reader towards further implications or new ideas; you could use it to mention wider issues, or to elaborate on the importance of your argument. It's also, of course, your opportunity to make a good final impression.

Your conclusion can take your reader beyond the confines of the question you've answered. In your conclusion, you can mention wider issues, make new connections, and elaborate on the significance of your findings. The conclusion should help your reader see something differently.

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Writing an effective conclusion: some ideas

- ***'So what?'***

  Why should your reader care about your argument?

- ***Show the broader implications***

  What does this argument tell us about other examples of a similar kind? How does one piece of study relate to wider questions in the same field?

- ***Come full circle***

  Pick up something from your introduction. Maybe you've mentioned an example, a situation or scenario; when you return to it in the conclusion, show how your argument in the essay has transformed our understanding of that example, situation or scenario.

- ***Synthesize***

  Don't just repeat the ideas in your essay. Show how they all fit together.

- ***Be provocative***

  End with a startling quotation, observation or implication.

- ***Point the way forward***

  Suggest a course of action, a new project, or further questions that would repay study.

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7 Editing

Name: Date Period:

Key points and questions	Details
Do my paragraphs obey the four key characteristics? Are my sentences straightforward? Am I using words well? Am I following the core academic converntions? Have I found a voice?	1. Produce coherent paragraphs: one idea; topic sentence; coherence; adequacy 2. Write straightforward sentences: nothing longer than 25 words; simple and well connected 3. Use words well: familiar to your reader; familiar to you; simple not complicated Develop your style by following the conventions of academic writing. Find your own, unique voice. • Imagine your ideal audience. • Take a stance. • Find a persona.

Summary

Editing matters. It helps you think better, communicate your ideas better, and achieve a good grade.

Don't try to write like an academic. Editing is the process of making your writing easier to read. We're aiming at text that is *accurate, brief* and *clear.*

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How you write is as important as *what* you write.

You probably know this already. You probably realize, even intuitively, that you can't write your essay in the way that you'd write an email to a friend.

You might suppose that your essay has got to 'sound' like the books and articles that you've been studying. Style, after all, is all about what's appropriate. You'd be expected to dress appropriately for your graduation ceremony; similarly, you're expected to write appropriately for your readers: the community of students and thinkers of which you're a part.

But how do you find that style? It can seem so different to the way you normally use language: formal, rather private, or even pompous. And, to be honest, most disciplines suffer from a good amount of rather poor academic writing.

Try reading this sentence, for example.

> *It is rarely found among specialist stakeholders that a robust conceptual link exists between the current understandings of the centrality of text to knowledge production and student learning, and the pragmatic problems of policy imperatives around efficiency, effectiveness, resource operability and capacity-building.*

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That's not too extreme an example of hard-core academic writing. Do you *really* want your essay to sound like that?

It can all be very confusing. What makes for good writing? What is your tutor looking for? And how do you know if you've improved your style, or merely changed it? Too many students receive little or no instruction in this area. As a result, too many students pay too little attention to their style. They're so relieved to have finished the essay that they can't face the prospect of reworking it; they may not even put it through the spellchecker on their computer.

And their grade suffers as a result.

7.1 Why edit?

Editing matters because it increases your chances of a good grade (or at least lessen the chances of losing marks). But editing matters for (at least) two other reasons.

- Editing helps you communicate your ideas more effectively. Well written essays capture readers' attention and influence their thinking.
- Even more importantly, editing helps *you* think better. An idea more clearly expressed is a better idea.

Editing is the process of making your writing easier to read. We're aiming at text that is *accurate, brief* and *clear.*

Don't try to write like an academic. Edit your text to make it *clearer.* And it's just not possible to produce clear, readable text immediately. We have to work at it: rewriting, polishing, refining our language until it says what we want to say, as well as possible.

Editing is essential to producing a better essay. Don't miss it out.

Here's the simplest possible version of an effective editing strategy.

1. **Produce coherent paragraphs.**
2. **Write straightforward sentences.**
3. **Use words well.**

You should edit *in this order*: paragraphs first, followed by sentences, and ending with words. It's the most efficient way to edit, because you'll see bigger improvements, more quickly, for less effort.

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Let's put a bit of detail into that list.

- **Produce coherent paragraphs.**
  - Every paragraph should discuss one idea.
  - That governing idea should be expressed in a sentence at the start of the paragraph.
  - Everything in the paragraph should relate coherently to that governing idea.
  - The paragraph should develop the governing idea adequately.

- **Write straightforward sentences.**
  - Vary the length of your sentences, but don't allow any sentence to extend beyond 25 words. (This is *not* a rule, and it's certainly not a grammatical rule. It's advice, offered by a friendly writer!)
  - Make your sentences as simple as you can. Try to avoid filling any sentence with more than three ideas.
  - Connect your sentences together so that the reader can find their way from one sentence to the next.

- **Use words well.**
  - Use the words that you know your reader will understand.
  - Use words that you have seen in the material you've studied.
  - Make sure that you use only words that *you* understand.
  - Never use a complicated word when a simpler one will do the job.

7.2 Bringing paragraphs under control

Editing your paragraphs will improve the quality of your writing more, and more quickly, than editing sentences or words. As you work on your paragraphs, you'll improve sentences and words at the same time. More than that: you'll improve the flow of your essay from paragraph to paragraph, so that the whole essay hangs together and becomes easier – and more pleasurable – to read.

Editing paragraphs is the most important part of the whole editing process.

A paragraph is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic. An effective paragraph has:

- a single governing idea;
- a topic sentence;
- coherence; and
- adequate development.

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The governing idea

The paragraph should focus on one idea. Let's call it the paragraph's *governing idea.* Everything in the paragraph should relate to that governing idea.

A topic sentence

A topic sentence expresses the paragraph's governing idea. Place the topic sentence at the *start* of the paragraph. (You may find that you have already written a good topic sentence at the *end* of a paragraph. If so, simply move it to the beginning.) Make sure that your topic sentence expresses only one idea, and that it's no more than about 15 words long.

In a sequence of paragraphs – a section – you should be able to read the topic sentences of each paragraph, in order, and understand the whole section in summary form.

Coherence

All the other sentences in the paragraph should fit together in a coherent way. In other words, you should be able to justify the order of the sentences if someone asked you to.

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You can create coherence in your paragraphs by creating bridges and transitional devices. Both of these knit your sentences together. (This stuff is called *text*. That word is related to the word *textile*: a fabric, knitted or woven together. That's what coherence does: it weaves or knits your sentences into a – well – *seamless fabric.*)

Textual bridges

You can knit your text together in two main ways.

- Repeat key words from one sentence in the following sentence.
- *Shakespeare wrote two cycles of history plays. These plays chronicle the stories of five English kings.*
- You can construct successive sentences in parallel form.

  Shakespeare's history plays deal with cycles of dynastic politics. Marlowe's history plays usually focus on individual leaders. Shaw's history plays examine moral and political themes more than the lives of individual leaders.

You can also knit your text together using *transitional devices.* These words and phrases show the reader how one idea relates to another.

> *Literacy rates in most European countries reach at least 90%.* ***In contrast****, literacy rates in Afghanistan struggle to reach 50%.*
>
> *Visible light consists of several different colours,* ***each*** *representing a different wavelength of the radiation spectrum.* ***For example****, red has a wavelength of 610–700 nm, yellow 550–590 nm and blue 450–500 nm.*
>
> *Periagoge (the opening up of the soul) is the beginning of a journey, and* ***therefore causes*** *an inner conflict: giving up what was accepted as real,* ***and*** *adopting the unknown as reality.*

You can find a comprehensive list of transitional devices here.

Adequate development

You should develop the governing idea fully within the paragraph. It's actually quite difficult to judge when you have adequately expanded on your governing idea. How much detail is enough? What's certain is that, if you've written only two sentences in your paragraph, you probably haven't said enough.

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To develop your topic more adequately, explore these questions.

- Is this argument an explanation or an argument?
- If you're explaining, how can you use one or more of the patterns of explanation more fully?

  - **Listing examples (illustrations, statistics, evidence, testimony, anecdotes or stories)**
  - **Categorizing examples into groups (name the groups and explain how the examples fit)**
  - **Defining a term**
  - **Comparison and contrast**
  - **Process analysis (or chronology: a sequence of events more like a narrative)**
  - **Cause and effect – including consequences**

- If you're arguing, are you setting out all the terms of the argument?
- If you're arguing, how are you supporting your argument? Almost certainly, with one or more patterns of explanation.

All four characteristics of an effective paragraph are present in this passage.

> *The language of tragedy functions not as a tool for communication between characters, but as a way of showing the audience the gulf between characters. Through this gulf, a distancing between story and spectator occurs. This distancing effect of tragedy disrupts the audience's identification with the protagonist, which was part of the original function of myth. Instead, tragedy creates a critical distance that allows the audience to judge what is happening on stage. For example, the manipulation of legalistic language sets the audience up as quasi-jurors, deciding the fate of the protagonists. Fifth-century Athens had established new courts with 'mass juries', with up to 1500 jurors.*

The writer:

- announces the **governing idea** of the paragraph (*language in tragedy functions as a distancing device*);
- presents the governing idea of the paragraph in a **topic sentence**;
- places the topic sentence at the head of the paragraph;
- creates **coherence** by repeating key words to bind sentences together (*gulf, distancing, protagonist*);
- uses transitional devices to guide the reader from one sentence to the next (*through this…, this, which, instead, for example*); and

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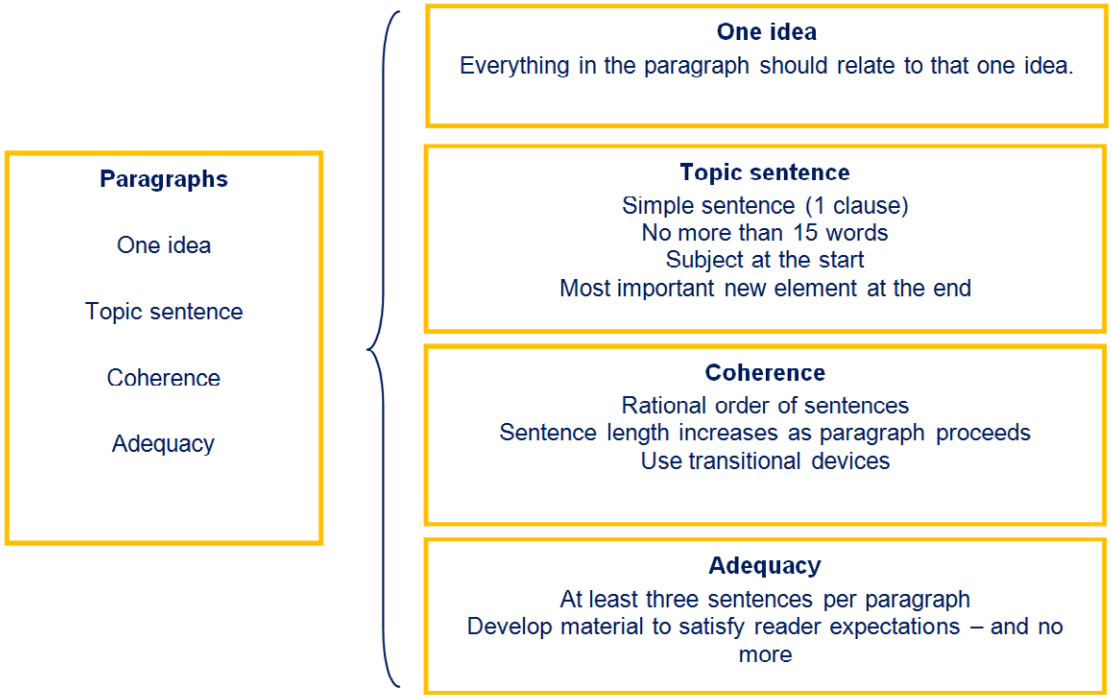
- **adequately develops** the topic through the use of different patterns of explanation:

  - **definition** (of the word *gulf*);
  - **contrast** (in the topic sentence itself, and between myth and tragedy);
  - **cause and effect** (how showing the gulf between characters leads to a gulf between action and audience);
  - **comparison** (audience as quasi-jurors); and
  - **example** (mass juries, with a simple statistic showing how a jury's size made it comparable to that of a theatre audience).

Paying attention to the four key characteristics of an effective paragraph has helped this student write more clearly, and also *clarify her own thinking*.



7.3 Constructing straightforward sentences

Your sentences express your ideas. (That's what sentences are for: to express thoughts or ideas.) They'll express your ideas better if you construct the sentences well. In fact, editing your sentences can actually help you create stronger ideas.

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How sentences work

The grammar of sentences reflects this function as carriers of thoughts.

- Every sentence has a **subject** – the person or thing that the sentence is about.
- The sentence says something about that subject: in grammatical terms, the part of the sentence that does that is called the **predicate**.
- The predicate always contains a **main verb**, which expresses what the subject is doing or being.

Here is an example.

International trade has led to the development of economic integration.

In this sentence, the subject is *international trade* and the predicate is everything in the sentence apart from those two words. The main verb is *has led*.

When we read sentences, we always look for the subject and the main verb. What's this sentence about? What is the subject doing? If we can answer those questions easily, the sentence will be easier to read.

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In the sentence we've just looked at, the subject appears at the very start and the main verb follows it immediately. Of course, we don't have to put the subject and main verb at the very start of a sentence.

When it is irradiated with visible light, a surface is said to be illuminated.

In this sentence, the subject (*a surface*) has been preceded by another element (*When it is irradiated with visible light*). This extra element has a grammatical name: it's called a **subordinate clause**. We have to read through that subordinate clause before we get to the sentence's main idea. As a result, the sentence is slightly more complicated and not quite so easy to read (in fact, we call sentences of this kind **complex)**. The writer has made reading a little easier by keeping the subordinate clause short, and by following it with a comma, so that we can see when it ends.

The best sentences always take the reader on a journey. The words at the end of the sentence should introduce something new. In our first sentence, we started with *international trade* and travelled to *economic integration.* In the second sentence, we started with something happening to a surface, and ended with a definition: the word *illuminated*.

The shorter and simpler the sentence, the easier the reader's journey will be. Try to take this journey.

> *In spite of the attempts by some communes at fostering economic and social liberalization in the relationships between peasants and serfs during the reign of Tzar Alexander II, principally through a strategy of imposing a low economic status on peasants, which resulted in their reduction to near-poverty, a centuries-long history of severe social distinctions, even among serfs, prevented full social equalization.*

It's a tough ride. We don't know at the start of the sentence where we're starting from: the subject of the sentence (*a…history of severe social distinctions*) and the main verb (*prevented*) don't appear until 42 words in. As a result, we feel that we're taking twists and turns without understanding the direction we should be travelling in.

Improving your sentences: the basics

- Aim for maximum sentence length of 25 words.
- Cut long sentences into separate sentences.
- Separate multiple sentences.
- Remove unnecessary words from long sentences.
- Simplify complicated sentences.
- Make non-sentences grammatically sound.
- Find strong subjects and verbs.

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Five ways to turn good sentences into brilliant sentences

Edit sentences in sequences. Here are five steps to help you take your reader on more enjoyable journeys through your essay.

1. Identify all the subjects of your sentences. Every subject should be like a *character* in a story. A character could be a person, a machine, an animal, or an organization. It could be a chemical element, a substance, a nation state or a planet. Even ideas or concepts can act like characters in a story.
2. Now identify all the main verbs of your sentences. Each verb should express what the character in the sentence is doing or being.
3. Place at the beginning of a sentence a character, idea or concept that you have mentioned in the previous sentence.
4. Place at the end of a sentence the new information that you want to introduce. [A-B. B-C. C-D.]
5. Place the most important new element at the very end of the sentence. (Place a new technical term, for example, at the end of a sentence.)

7.4 Using words well

The English language has a huge vocabulary. At any one time, the Oxford English Dictionary contains about 650,000 words (old words fall out of use; new words appear all the time). French, by comparison, contains only about 150,000 words.

Why the vast wordhoard? In part, because English has grown up by mixing and matching words from different languages. As a result, we often have a choice of words meaning roughly (or *approximately*) the same thing.

For example, you could *read, peruse* or *study* a book. You could *try, attempt* or *endeavour* to understand it. You could *speak, talk* or *converse* with your tutor about it. And so on.

With all this choice, which are the best words to choose?

This is a particularly important question when you're writing an essay. Academic language is not exactly like day-to-day street language. (Perhaps you've already noticed that!) You might feel *worried, concerned* or even *intimidated* about how to use words in your essay.

So let's explore the forest of words and seek out the best to use.

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Editing words

- **Be accurate.** *Never* use a word that you don't understand. The danger of using unfamiliar, fancy language is that you'll use it wrongly. Of course, as you study, you'll discover new words and use them. Make sure that you've looked them up, asked about them and tested them in your own speaking *before* putting them in your essay.
- **Be brief.** Remove words that add nothing to your meaning. Find strong, specific subjects for your sentences, and vivid, interesting verbs to express what those subjects are doing.
- **Be clear.** Never use a long word when a short word will do.

In the world of essay writing, two aspects of word use cause particular controversy: passive verbs, and abstract nouns. We need to know about both, and how to use them well.

Passive verbs

Verbs can be either active or passive. An active verb expresses what its subject does.

*The government **introduced** a Health Improvement and Protection Bill in 1934.*

A passive verb expresses what its subject suffers or has done to it.

*A Health Improvement and Protection Bill **was introduced** by the government in 1934.*

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Sentences with active verbs are shorter, stronger and more dynamic than those with passive ones. They're also easier to understand: passive verbs force us to take extra mental steps to understand them.

We can transform passive verbs into active ones by asking: "By whom?" We can then put the actor into the sentence as its main subject.

> *A Health Improvement and Protection Bill was introduced* [***by whom?***] *by the government in 1934.*
>
> *The government* [***new actor; character doing the action***] *introduced a Health Improvement and Protection Bill in 1934.*

Passive verbs have their uses. We might want, for example, to focus on a person suffering an action, rather than the thing or person doing the action.

> *The victim **was** apparently **struck** by a moving vehicle at about 3am.*

We might use a passive verb in a sentence where the person acting is not important – or if it could be anybody.

> *The aurora borealis **can be observed** at high latitudes in the northern hemisphere.*
>
> *The first coat of emulsion **is applied** after two coats of primer.*

Actually, even in these examples, an active verb may sometimes be preferable.

> *We can observe the aurora borealis only from high latitudes in the northern hemisphere.*
>
> *Apply the first coat of emulsion after applying two coats of primer.*

In academic writing, we might want to emphasize the result of an action rather than the person doing it.

> *Glass **is** usually **classified** as a solid.*
> (Rather than: *Scientists usually classify glass as a solid.*)

Of course, it might be vital to state who is doing the action.

> *The attack **was defined** as terrorism.*
>
> *Government sources defined the attack as terrorism; rebel groups saw it as a legitimate act of war.*

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It may sometimes be useful to use a passive verb to avoid creating an inflammatory tone.

> *The biological differences between men and women **have** often **been used** to legitimate structures of social inequality.*

On the other hand, in an instance such as this, it might be critically important to identify just who has been doing the legitimating.

> *Politicians have often used the biological differences between men and women to legitimate structures of social inequality.*

In essays, passive verbs often slip in unnoticed, as part of constructions beginning with the word 'it'.

> *It **was theorized** by Copernicus that the Earth revolved around the sun.*

> *It **has been conjectured** that political liberation of oppressed groups comes about only as a result of economic development.*

> *It **has been asserted** in this essay that Charles Dickens is considerably more derivative in his narrative techniques than **has** previously **been** thought.*

These constructions may feel 'academic', but we can usually dispense with them.

> *Copernicus theorized that the Earth revolved around the sun.*

> *Brenton, Smith and Mehta have all conjectured that political liberation of oppressed groups comes about only as a result of economic development.*

> *This essay has argued that Charles Dickens is considerably more derivative in his narrative techniques than scholars have previously thought.*

Many teachers continue to urge students to use passive verbs rather than active ones. The main reason for this advice seems to be that passive verbs make your writing sound more objective, and therefore academically more respectable. This advice is especially common in scientific writing. Thus, we're sometimes told, we shouldn't write:

> *I poured 30cc of hydrochloric acid into the beaker.*

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Instead, we may be told that we should write:

> *30cc of hydrochloric acid was poured into the beaker.*

That advice is now changing, but not consistently. Passive verbs remain a source of controversy. (Find an excellent summary of the argument, and a list of articles, here.)

Indeed, some writers of study guides seem to be uncertain exactly what a passive verb is. They confuse 'passive' writing with 'writing in the third person'. (I have two such guides on my desk, but names *will not be named*.) It's generally good academic practice to avoid using the pronoun 'I', which is grammatically called the first person, and to use the third person (*he*, *she* or *it*) instead. (The second person, in case you were wondering, is *you*.) We'll discuss this question when we look at the key characteristics of academic writing. Simply removing the word *I* does not mean that you're making your writing more 'passive'.

Prefer active verbs to passive ones.

In academic writing, we need to allocate responsibility for actions and ideas. We're much more likely to do so clearly if we use active verbs and names. Many academics, academic journals and writing tutors now advise students to avoid passive verbs, or to use them sparingly. If in doubt, ask your tutor what they advise.

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Abstract nouns and nominalization

Nouns name things, people, times, places or qualities.

Concrete nouns name things physically present in the world (*table, woman, pen, car, tree*); **abstract nouns** name ideas, concepts or qualities that cannot be sensed physically (*growth, awareness, training, marketing, possibility*).

To make an abstract noun, take an adjective or a verb and add an ending.

Terminate	(verb)	>	*termination*
Probable	(adjective)	>	*probability*
Produce	(verb)	>	*production*
Pompous	(adjective)	>	*pomposity*

Many abstract nouns have standard endings.

Traction	*Announcement*	*Authority*
Proliferation	*Management*	*Operability*
Decision	*Arrangement*	*Profundity*
Replication	*Development*	*Sustainability*

To create these abstract nouns is called **nominalization**.

Academic writing tends to nominalize a lot. The academic conversation, after all, is about ideas, theories and processes. Indeed, some abstract nouns are the only words available to express a particular, specialized concept.

Many academic writing guides advocate nominalization for another reason. Like passive verbs, abstract nouns lend your writing an air of cool objectivity.

And these words have another seductive quality. They make your writing sound more academic.

Compare these two passages.

> *Vögelin 'differentiates' his cosmos into distinct regions. Using Judeo-Christian terms, he creates different states to separate the beings that inhabit it, and to help keep that cosmos stable. If these states were not kept separate, the beings that inhabit the cosmos would remain confusingly similar.*

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> *Vögelin employs the term 'differentiation' to facilitate compartmentalization of his cosmos. Using categorizations familiar from the Judeo-Christian tradition, Vögelin's differentiation serves as an emphasis of the separation between supernatural beings, the principal means of preservation in the stasis of the cosmos. Differentiation connotes distinction in a grouping of beings that would otherwise maintain their similarities.*

There's no doubt that the second version sounds considerably more impressive. And who wouldn't want to sound impressive?

So it wouldn't be surprising to find yourself using lots of long words ending '-ion', '-ment', '-ity' or '-ance'.

But all abstract nouns should come with a safety warning. They can suck the life out of your writing. Because they don't fire the reader's imagination, in the way that concrete nouns do, they make your writing dull and stultifying. Helen Sword, an academic who champions good writing, calls them 'zombie nouns'.

Ration your use of abstract nouns. Replace them, if you can, with verbs or adjectives. If you can only replace an abstract noun with a group of shorter, more concrete words, consider keeping it.

Using words well

- Prefer active verbs to passive verbs.
- Prefer familiar words to rare words.
- Use strong, specific and well placed verbs.
- Balance abstract nouns with concrete nouns.
- Punctuate clearly and simply.

7.5 Developing your style

Developing your style is really a matter of finding your own words. And finding your own words matters for four reasons.

- It helps you understand what you've been studying more deeply.
- It helps your tutor see how well you're learning.
- It helps you hold genuine conversations with your tutor and other students.

The fourth reason is by far the most important.

- Finding your own words helps you have *better ideas.*

Your writing style must conform to certain academic conventions; but it can still be lively, entertaining and engaging. At its best, it will say what *you* want to say, in the way that *you* want to say it.

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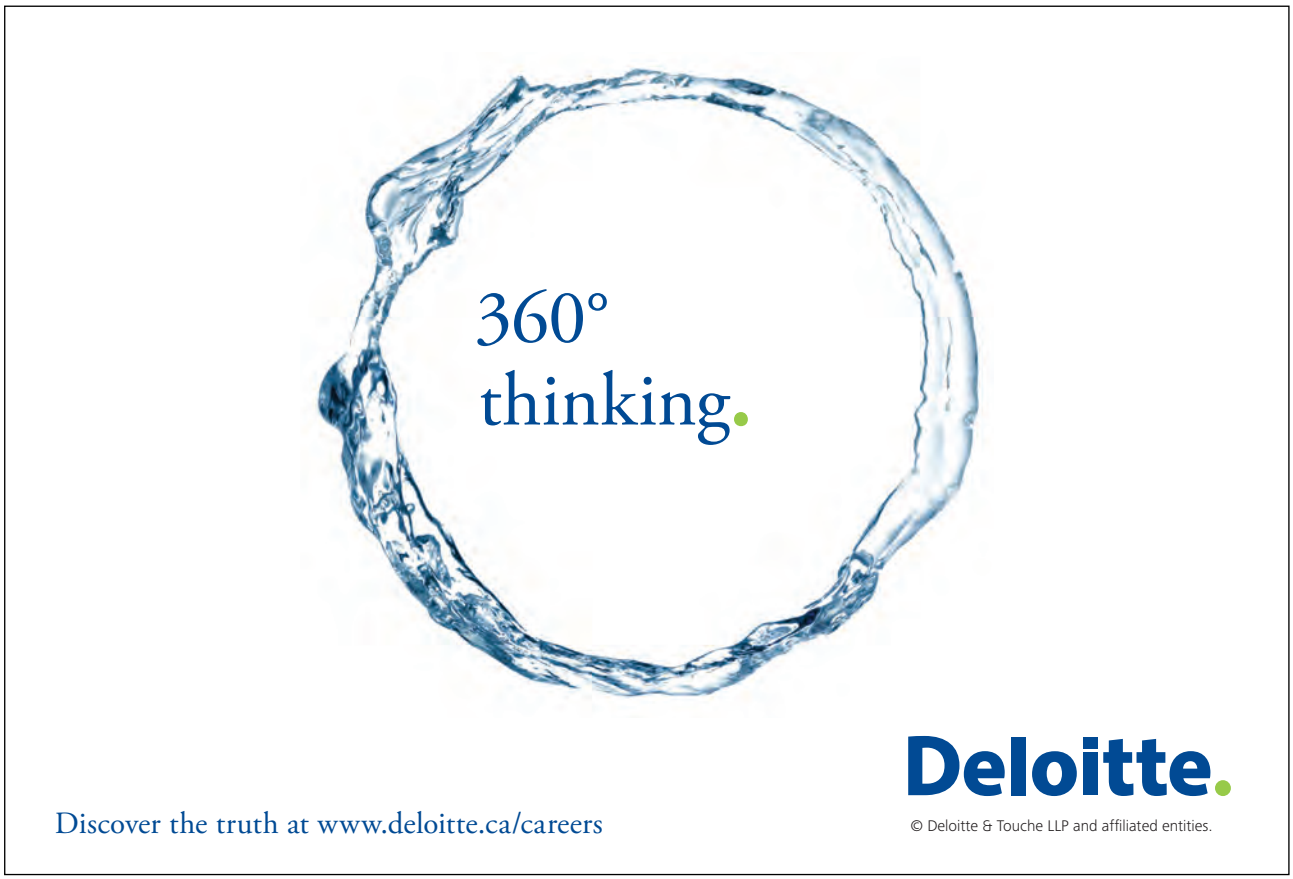
We need to understand the conventions of academic writing, how to bring our own writing to life, and how to find our voice as an academic writer.

7.51 Academic writing: the core conventions

Academic writing has seven key features.

Argument	Taking a position and defending it
Evidence	Using verifiable information to support an argument
Scholarship	Showing how an argument and evidence links to other research in the field
Debate	Setting different arguments against each other
Critical analysis	Taking arguments apart to show their strengths and weaknesses
Objectivity	Removing personal opinions and feelings, letting arguments and evidence speak for themselves
Precision	Using words accurately



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Here's a checklist of things to include and avoid.

Do	Don't
Use the third person: ***he, she, it*** **– and use names**	**Use the first person:** ***I, we***
Use active verbs **(after checking with your tutor or department)**	**Use passive verbs** **(after checking with your tutor or department)**
Use evidence from specific, reliable sources ***In chapter 23 of* Das Kapital*, Marx states that…***	**Use generalizations that can't be verified** ***People tend to believe…***
Use acronyms, spelling them out fully when you use them first ***The Greater London Authority (GLA) was established in…***	**Use contractions and informal abbreviations** ***Can't, won't, doesn't; ie, eg***
Be objective ***There appears to be little consensus about…*** ***The conclusion seems to be that…***	**Offer extreme judgements** ***It is absolutely clear that…*** ***This outrageous argument…***
Use gender-inclusive words ***People, humankind, Chair, they* (for *he or she*)**	**Gender-specific words unless specifically appropriate** ***Mankind, men, he* (or *she*)**
Use language that is as simple and clear as possible	**Use long, complicated words unnecessarily (or: when you don't need to!)**
Use precise language ***The president withdrew from power for ten years.***	**Use slang or idiomatic language** ***The president took a back seat for ten years.***

By common convention, academic writing uses formal language. Unfortunately, there's no strict definition of the word 'formal' in this context; as a result, students often become confused about which words are acceptable and which are not.

Rather than suggest which words you *should* use in your essays, it's more helpful to list the kinds of words that you *shouldn't* use. This selection is not exhaustive, but it covers the most common issues.

In-group language

Informal language includes the kinds of words that social groups use to identify themselves. Young people, especially, coin new uses for words: *rents* for parents, *kicks* for shoes, and all those words meaning 'good' or 'excellent': *wicked, bad, sick.* (Apologies if these examples are hopelessly out of date.)

Never use this kind of language in your essays.

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Non-specific words

Avoid words that convey only the most general meanings: a selective list might include *many, good, very, thing, nice, stuff, lots* and *a lot* (which is always written as two words, by the way). Search out all the words that are general and vague – and remove them. In particular, take out adverbs that we often add to adjectives: *really, actually, basically, just, essentially*.

Personal pronouns and adjectives

This convention is less rigid. Usually, academic writers will prefer not to use *I, me, my, mine, you, yours, we, us, our* or *ours*. Exceptions do occur: in more personal essays, for example, or in polemical essays. (Notice that I don't include the third-person pronouns and adjectives: *he, his, she, her, it, its, they, them, their*: it would hard to avoid using them in any essay.)

You'll notice that I've been using these very pronouns and adjectives throughout this book. (In that last sentence, for example.) That's because I wanted this text to be informal: it's a guide to writing essays, not an essay or an academic textbook. Just as you would use these pronouns and adjectives in a tutorial, I use them here.

Contractions

Academic writers dislike contracting full words: *can't* instead of *cannot, didn't* for *did not*, *it's* for *it is* or *it has*, and so on. Always write out these words in full in your essay.

I've used as many contractions as possible in this book. I want this book to speak to you informally. We all use contractions in our conversations, including tutorials, seminars and workshops. That's why I'm using them here.

'Throat-clearers'

Avoid those little words that we might use to fill a gap in the conversation: *well, so, also.* Some academic writers dislike *first, secondly, thirdly* and *lastly*; I'm less concerned about them, because they can be useful markers in your argument. Any essay will benefit from deleting the phrases *in conclusion* and *to conclude.* The reader can see that you're coming to the end, and the wording of your conclusion should make it clear that this *is* the conclusion.

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Unhelpful descriptors

Too many essays use sentences like the ones in the list below. If you find yourself writing any of them, replace them with something more meaningful.

The author uses…to draw the reader's attention [*in, to…*]
The author uses…to catch the reader's attention.
The author uses…to show…
The author uses…to prove [*that…, a point*]
As was previously mentioned…
As stated above…
As you can see…
As can be seen…
As we can see…
We can see from this…that…
As this analysis makes clear…

Clichés

A cliché is a set phrase that has become overused and meaningless. Essays should not include them.

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How to spot a cliché? Ask yourself: "How often have I heard this phrase used?" The more often you've heard it, the more likely it is to be a cliché.

At the end of the day
When all's said and done
Fine and dandy
Nip it in the bud
Taking the easy way out
A real no-brainer
What goes around comes around

7.5.2 Finding your voice

Your voice as a writer is defined by three factors: your sense of the audience; your stance; and your persona.

- **Imagine your ideal audience.** It's probably best to imagine someone more or less your equal (not an experienced professor, for example), who happens not to know a great deal about the topic you're discussing. Assume that this imaginary audience is interested in what you have to say on the topic, and has asked you for your contribution to the conversation.

- **Take a stance.** Is your stance critical, supportive, helpful, questioning, thoughtful? Passionate, maybe? How objective do you want to appear? Is your stance collaborative or confrontational?

  You may want to take a definite position on the question: a position influenced by your beliefs, values or morals, for example. If so, you *must* justify that position by using the evidence and the ideas you've been studying. You *must* support your position by reasoned argument.

  Whatever stance you choose, it should be a stance that pays proper attention and respect to the materials you've been studying.

- **Find a persona.** How do you want to come across? As an expert? An entertainer? A friendly co-researcher? It's usually best to imagine yourself as a calm, reasonable observer.

Notice that, in the last few paragraphs, I've used words to do with speaking rather than writing. I've talked about your 'voice', for example, and an 'audience' rather than a 'readership'. I've used the words 'saying' and 'speaking', rather than 'writing'. Those choices are deliberate. The best writing 'speaks' to the reader: when we read it, we feel that we can 'hear' the writer's voice.

In the next chapter, we'll look at this important final element of essay-writing: feedback, and how to make best use of it.

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8 Dealing with feedback

Name: Date Period:

Key points and questions	Details
Am I worried about getting feedback?	Why are you worried about getting feedback? • You've asked for feedback before, and it didn't help • The feedback might negative • You might not know who to ask • You don't want to waste your tutor's time
How can I improve the feedback I get?	Plan how you want feedback.
When do I want feedback?	When? • at the start; • during the research stage; • refined thesis stage; • after writing the first draft; • after the final draft; • after the tutorial
How am I going to plan my tutorial?	You'll get much better feedback if you present your essay well.
What questions do I want to ask during the tutorial?	Divide your tutorial into TWO sections: (1) the assignment; (2) your development as a writer

Summary

Everything we've explored in this book so far will help you become a better essay writer. Another way to improve is to get constructive, specific feedback.

No matter how much you check and recheck, only another person can objectively assess your writing.

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Everything we've explored in this book so far will help you become a better essay writer. Another way to improve is to get constructive, specific feedback. No matter how much you check and recheck, only another person can objectively assess your writing.

Writing is intensely personal. Asking for feedback is rather like asking for feedback on your dress sense. Let's look at a few of the reasons you might be hesitating.

- **You've asked for feedback before, and it didn't help.** In fact, it might have been painful. Reflect on what made that feedback less than helpful.

  Remedy: try something else. Ask someone different, or seek feedback differently. Think about asking for feedback at different stages of the essay-writing process.

- **The feedback might negative.** After all, ask most people what they think about something, and they'll probably tell you what's wrong with it.

  Remedy: ask for positive and negative feedback separately. What does the reader like about the essay? Where's the most interesting part? What makes sense? What's confusing? And so on.

- **You might not know who to ask.** The obvious choice, usually, would be your tutor. But the best person to offer help can vary, depending on your situation. If you want useful feedback, almost any interested reader can offer something.

  Remedy: think about asking a fellow student, a friend outside your field, or a family member. In fact, try to get feedback from a range of people.

- **You don't want to waste your tutor's time.** All tutors are busy. But most college staff set time aside for precisely this kind of conversation. And you may be pleasantly surprised at your tutor's delight that a student actually *wants* to write better essays.

  Remedy: when you approach your tutor, begin by acknowledging that you are demanding some of their time, and suggest making an appointment. Of course, you must then keep it.

- **You might not know how to ask.** You could simply say: "Take a look at this essay, will you?"

  Remedy: ask for specific comments. Seek feedback about the structure, the paragraphing, the style. If you ask a question like: "do you think these paragraphs are in the right order?" – you're helping your colleague to offer better feedback – which will probably make them feel more relaxed, too.

It can be helpful to gain feedback at different stages during the project. Each stage offers different benefits.

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At the start

Do you understand the question? Have you analysed the question fully and appropriately? What kind of argument are you pursuing? What sort of answers would make sense in the context of this question?

During the research stage

What's your initial thesis statement? Does it make sense? What kind of information should you be looking for? How does the information relate to thesis statement? How can you organize the information more effectively?

At the refined thesis stage

Does your refined thesis make sense? Does it include a specific claim and a ground plan of the essay structure? Are you organizing your ideas well? Have you missed anything?

After writing the first draft

Does your essay make overall sense? Is it interesting? Have you argued coherently and adequately for your thesis statement? Is your evidence convincing? Are your arguments and explanations clear? What about the introduction and the conclusion?

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Final draft

How are your paragraphs? Do they each have a clear governing idea, expressed in a topic sentence at the head of the paragraph? Do the sentences coherently and adequately develop the governing ideas of the paragraphs? Are any of my sentences too long, or too complicated? Are you using cool, objective language? Are you using too many passive verbs or abstract nouns? How about the grammar, punctuation and spelling?

After the tutorial

What do the tutor's comments tell you? What contributed to the grade or mark that your tutor gave you? How could you have improved the essay? What will you do differently next time?

8.1 Presenting your essay well

You'll get much better feedback if you present your essay well. Your tutor or department may have rules or guidelines about formatting and presenting essays; if so, you should follow them.

If you're free to present your essay in your own way, I suggest the following.

- Use a serif typeface. Times New Roman, Georgia and Baskerville are all serif typefaces: the serifs are the tiny strokes on the corners of the letters. Arial, Verdana and Tahoma are all sanserif typefaces: they lack these tiny strokes. A serif typeface is usually more appropriate for academic work, and on paper it's usually easier to read.
- Set your text to no smaller than 10 point, and probably no bigger than 12 point. Which leaves 11 point as a third option.
- Create line spacing of at least 1.5 lines, and consider double spacing.
- Create a fairly wide left margin. Probably about 50% wider than you would normally use. This gives your tutor lots of room to make comments. It's called a scholar's margin.
- Left align the text. Unless specifically asked to use full justification, avoid it. Full justification makes text considerably harder to read.
- Print single-sided.
- Avoid underlining for titles, headings, or the essay question at the head of the essay. Underlining, like full justification, makes reading more difficult.
- Use only bold or italic for emphasis within the text. Bold text works best for words you are defining, or subject words. Italic works best as the equivalent of stressing a word.
- Black text on white paper. Nothing fancy.
- Bind the sheets well. A single staple may be enough. Two staples will help ensure that no sheets are lost.

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8.2 Making the most of feedback

Your tutorial is one of the most valuable timeslots of your college career. Both you and your tutor know that this time is limited, and you will want to make the most of it. Your tutor has a responsibility to pay you full attention, to offer specific, detailed feedback on your work, and to help you study more effectively. You have clear responsibilities, too: to prepare your questions and study topics; to respond to what your tutor is telling you; and to act on their suggestions.

You may be meeting your tutor before submitting the essay; more likely, you'll be meeting after the essay has come back to you, with your tutor's comments. It's certainly a good idea to schedule the tutorial at least 24 hours after receiving the marked essay: you then have time to study the comments (and to calm down if you've been upset). Mark any comments that you don't understand or that you want to discuss further. This is also a good moment to re-read your essay critically. It may be a week since you last saw it; that gap in time allows you to reflect on your text, with all its strengths and points for improvement.

When you get your essay back, be sure to read all the comments.

Many students look only at the grade; they waste the opportunity to exploit the help they're being offered. Even if the grade's good, you should pay close attention to every comment. Your tutor's feedback can help you build on your strengths and identify patterns of errors or shortcomings.

If you don't understand a comment, mark it and plan to ask about it. Don't worry about sounding foolish; every question is a chance to learn more. It's reasonable to assume that your tutor genuinely wants to help you become a better student and a better writer.

I think you should divide your tutorial into two main sections. In the first, you can discuss the specific assignment, and the wider issues that arise from it. In the second – perhaps not so long – you can discuss your development as a writer. It's hard to discuss both of these matters at the same time.

You may want to challenge the grade you've been given, or at least understand it more fully. Be very clear what you want to know. Are you challenging the grade? If so, what are your reasons? Do you want to know exactly where you did less well, so that you can do better next time? Or do you want to understand the grade in the wider context of your study career? Having specific questions will help you maintain a cool, friendly conversation about a potentially contentious subject.

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Don't be too concerned if your tutor has covered your essay in comments. Every comment is potential help on the long journey towards a good final grade. Many tutors write positive comments: your tutor may find your ideas interesting! And don't be too worried if the essay has very few comments on it. Some tutors comment more than others. Your tutor may simply have been extremely busy. Use the tutorial to get more feedback, and make your own notes from that.

Of course, you don't *have* to accept the feedback you're given. Your tutor may have misunderstood what you've been trying to achieve; they may not have grasped your argument completely. If a comment doesn't make sense, challenge it. The resulting conversation could reveal some interesting new ideas.

In the final analysis, this essay is yours. You are responsible for its content, its structure and its style. You must take responsibility for it.

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A checklist for your tutorial

Asking for specific feedback can be the best way to get the advice you need.

Understanding the assignment

Did I interpret the question well? Was the essay the right length and well structured? Did I use good sources?

Factual content

Did I misunderstand any material? Where else could I look for more?

Interpretation and critical analysis

Was my thesis strong? Did my argument make sense? Did I support it sufficiently?

Structure

Were my ideas in a logical order? Could I have structured the essay differently?

Flow

Did I write good transitions between sentences? Did my introduction work? Did my paragraphs work? How about my conclusion?

Style

Am I in line with the general conventions of academic writing? Is my style easy to read? Am I using too many passive verbs or abstract nouns? Do earlier essays suggest regular stylistic troublespots?

Grammar

Am I making the same grammatical errors regularly or frequently? Am I constructing sentences properly?

Spelling and typos

Have used the spellchecker? Am I making frequent or regular spelling errors? Are there any signs of inattention or laziness?

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9 Appendix: where to go from here

There is a wealth of material in print and online to help you further. I shall be extending the conversation I've started in this book by writing regular posts on my blog, Distributed Intelligence.

Book list

Ballard, B. And Clanchy, J. (1983), *Essay Writing for Students: A Practical Guide*, London, Longman

Chambers, E. and Northedge, A. (1997), *The Arts Good Study Guide*, Milton Keynes, Open University

Crème, P. and Lea, M. (1997), *Writing at University: A Guide for Students*, Buckingham, Open University Press

Crowley, S. and Hawhee, D.(2004), *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students,* London, Pearson

Dunleavy, P. (1986), *Studying for a degree in the Humanities and the Social Sciences*, Basingstoke, Macmillan

Fairbairn, G.J. and Winch, C. (1996), *Reading, writing and reasoning: a guide for students*, Buckingham, Open University Press

Maner, Martin (2000), *The Research Process: A Complete Guide and Reference for Writers*, New York, McGraw Hill Education

Northedge, A. (2005), *The Good Study Guide*, Milton Keynes, Open University

Northedge, A., Thomas, J., Lane, A. and Peasegood, A. (1997), *The Sciences Good Study Guide*, Milton Keynes, Open University

Redman, P. et al. (1998), *Good Essay Writing: A Social Sciences Guide*, Milton Keynes, Open University

Sherman, J. (1994), *Feedback: Essential writing skills for intermediate students*, Oxford, Oxford University Press

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Websites and links

Chanock, K., Krishnan, L., and Rao, V. (2007), *A Visual Guide to Essay Writing*, Sydney, AALL.
http://www.aall.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/essayWritingVisualGuide.pdf

Advice from the Open University, United Kingdom:
http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/essay-and-report-writing-skills/content-section-12

Handouts from UNC College of Arts and Sciences:
http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/

What Tutors Look For When Marking Essays
(This is Chapter 2 from Peter Redman's book, *Good Essay Writing*, listed in the book list.)

How to set up a study timetable:
http://www.studentbox.com.au/notes/Set_up_a_study_timetable#.UhXfAz9n9yI

Research project calculator:
https://rpc.elm4you.org/

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For more on 'morning pages' go to:
http://juliacameronlive.com/books-by-julia/
http://750words.com/

The Comprehension Toolkit is a resource for primary school teachers, but it has lots to teach anyone about how to do research more creatively:
http://www.comprehensiontoolkit.com/grade3_6/contents.asp

Information on Cornell notes:
http://freeology.com/wp-content/files/cornellnotetaker2.pdf
http://1stopbrainshop.com/study-skills/the-split-pagethe-cornell-system/940/

Ten Cs for evaluating internet sources:
http://www.montgomerycollege.edu/Departments/writegt/htmlhandouts/Ten%20C%20internet%20sources.htm

Citation management:
http://www.library.cornell.edu/resrch/citmanage/mla

International Baccalaureate: assessment criteria:
http://www.ibo.org/diploma/curriculum/core/essay/

These are the best grammar sites I've found so far:
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/
http://www.askoxford.com/?view=uk

For online guides to style and usage, use:

The Guardian style guide
http://www.guardian.co.uk/styleguide

The Economist style guide
http://www.economist.com/styleguide/introduction

The BBC News style guide
http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/collegeofjournalism/how-to/news-style-guide

Great advice on life at university or college:
http://theuniversityblog.co.uk/

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Specific pages from this blog relevant to essay writing:
http://theuniversityblog.co.uk/2011/04/26/get-to-grips-with-academic-writing/

Admissions essays:
http://apply.jhu.edu/apply/essays.html
https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/essays/3-ways-to-approach-common-college-essay-questions
https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/essays/tips-for-writing-an-effective-application-essay-college-admissions

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